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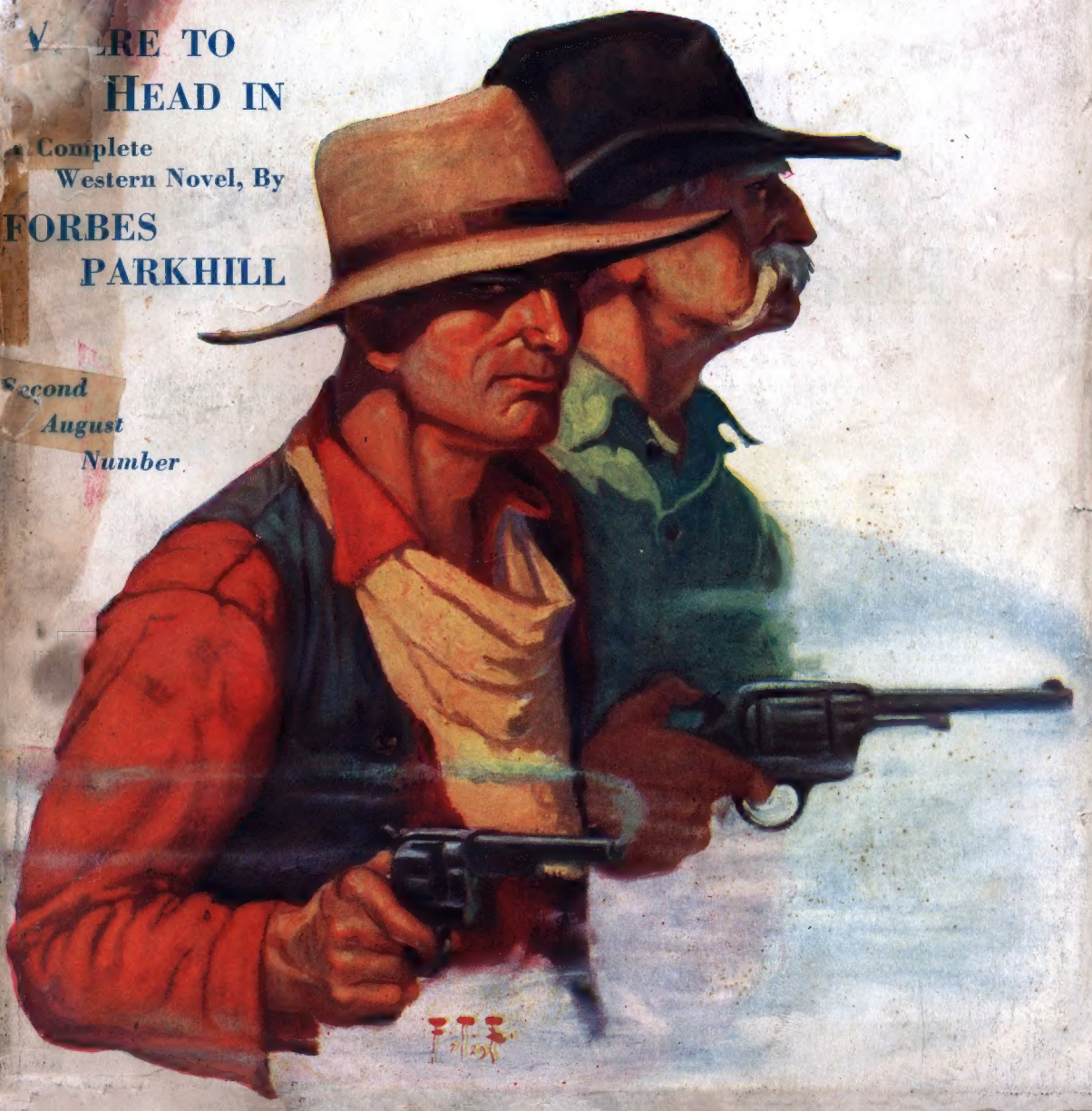
Ace-High Magazine

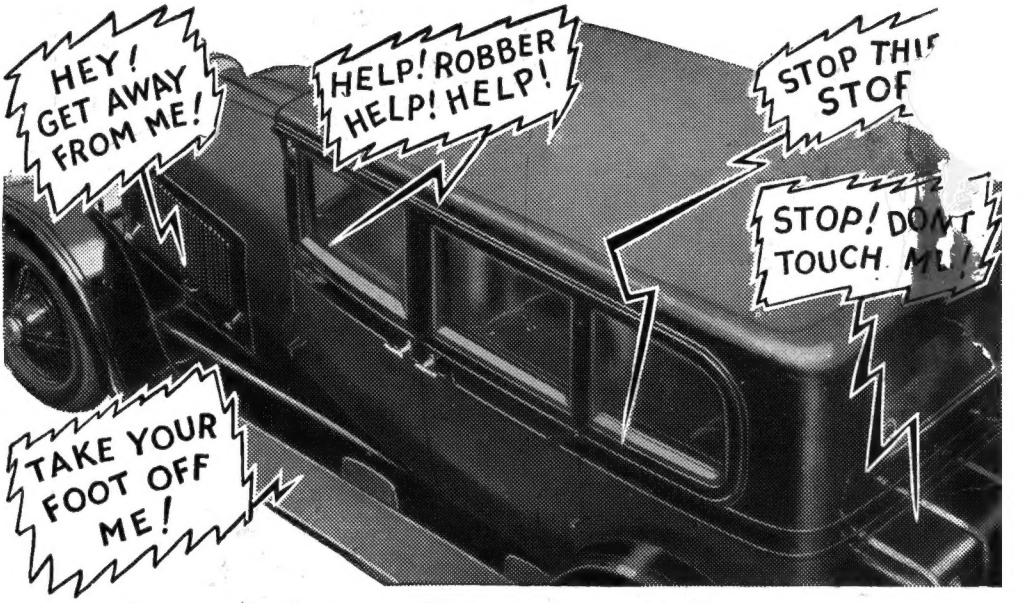
...RE TO
HEAD IN

A Complete
Western Novel, By

FORBES
PARKHILL

Second
August
Number





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WHERE TO HEAD IN

A COMPLETE WESTERN NOVEL

By Forbes Parkhill

It's a hard job to find a man, when you must recognize him by the way he draws his six-gun.

CHAPTER I

Blaze Away!

FLASH GREET paused at the door of the eating house, eased the gunbelt which sagged about his lean hips, and scanned the length of the dusty street with keen gray eyes. The June sun was twenty minutes below the rim of the mesa, and the softening shadows of dusk were beginning to veil the scabby adobe shacks and false-fronted frame store buildings.

"Lessee, Supy," he said to his stocky, red-faced companion, a suspicion of a smile playing about his determined lips, "this is the burg yuh said was the wildest, toughest town west of the Pecos, ain't it? Looks plumb peaceable to me. Too peaceable."

Supy's pale yellow brows contracted into a worried frown.

"Don't talk thataway, Flash. It's bad luck. Sorta spittin' in the face of Providence, so to speak. I onct knowed a gent talked like that, and he went into a decline and died inside of two year. Even the fastest gun-slinger in the country, like you are, ain't got no call to monkey with Fate. 'Cause this town shore *is* tough. They's more killin's here in a week than in the whole of the Panhandle in a year!"

Flash's gray eyes widened in mock astonishment. "Yeah? I don't see the gutters runnin' knee-deep in gore, Supy. Besides, a town with a name like this'n simply *can't* be that tough. With a name like Rosebud, it oughta be—"

"Look!" interrupted Supy, pointing to the window of the eating house. The pane was pierced by two bullet holes, each plugged with a twisted fragment of pancake. "It's peaceable enough now, Flash. But maybe that's just the

calm before the storm. Tomorrow's election day. If hell don't pop off, I'm a Piute. I just *know* we're due for trouble. Didn't I spill the salt down at Carrizozo two weeks ago?"

"Trouble?" grinned Flash. "That's my dish. Never did have a bellyful. But right now, I'm empty as a dry arroyo. C'mon inside, and let's wolf us down a armful of pigstrip and garbanzos."

The eating house was crowded, but the customary clatter of dishes and clamor of voices was strangely lacking. For the most part the customers were eating in grim silence. What conversation there was was conducted in hushed voices. Flash and Supy twined their legs about stools at the lunch trough, and proceeded to inspect the motley assemblage as reflected in the broad mirror behind the counter.

It included many tanned cowpunchers, in chaps and spurs; bearded miners; raw-boned, husky tie hacks, several of whom Supy guessed to be sheepmen; a sprinkling of Mexicans, and a few in "store clothes," who doubtless were storekeepers and traveling salesmen. One huge, pasty-faced fellow, seated in a rear booth with three others, was garbed like a parson. His meal finished, he rolled an unlighted cigar between thick lips as he listened impassively to the hurried whispers of his companions.

"Supy," said Flash, gazing in the mirror, "you rode for a outfit hereabouts three year ago, and claim to know something about this burg. Where 'bouts at does that fishbelly-complected cuss, rigged out like a sky pilot, deal 'em?"

"He don't deal 'em, no more, hisself. That's Chuska Joe Tarbo. He owns the Rosebud Monte Carlo, where I fed the kitty my wages for five months, hand runnin'. He owns 'most every joy-juice shop and dive in town. He owns the sheriff and the county commissioners. He doggoned near owns Datil County. 'Less things have changed sinct I flagged my kite, he's the big political boss hereabouts. Long as he pulls the strings, Rosebud will be the widest open, hell-roarin'est town between the Canadians and the Mogollons."

Flash nodded. "Lessee—far's I can tell, they's only one gent in this whole place that ain't heeled: that feller in the store clothes alone at the table at t'other end of the room. Know him?"

Supy shook his head. "He musta come here sinct my time. He's crazy as a Nueces steer if he don't pack a gun in this man's town. Maybe he's got one under his coat. Looks like he knows how to take care of hisself, though. He wears range boots under his pants legs, and his mug is burnt saddle-color. So I reckon he's a rancher, maybe. Don't yuh think?"

But Flash failed to answer. Supy turned, to find his pal gazing with rapt attention at the waitress.

"A woman!" he exclaimed disgustedly. "Thought yuh was offa women?"

"Yeah. I was. But this—this'n's different! Man, grab yoreself a look!"

Supy grabbed himself a look at the smiling dark eyes, the chestnut curls, the vivid coloring, the trim figure—and burst into an involuntary whistle of admiration.

"Different? You said it! Makes a feller thankful he ain't blind!" And than a tinge of jealousy crept into his voice. "You ain't goin' to lose yore head over this lulu of a hasher, are yuh now, Flash? 'Member, a gent in yore line can't afford to bother hisself none about women. When she learns yo're a professional gun-slinger, she'll give yuh the snake-eye, like all the rest. G'wan, Flash, look t'other way. Please, Flash—me and you is pals, and we don't want no female woman comin' betwixt us. Aw, *compadre*—"

But Flash continued to gaze, fascinated. When she took their orders she flashed them a dazzling smile, tossing the chestnut curls out of her eyes with a little jerk of her head. Flash was a bit disappointed to note it was the same friendly smile she gave nearly all the

customers—friendly, but with a certain "keep your distance" air about it which forbade undue familiarity.

The girl was wearing a silk kerchief, the ends of which were passed through a ring. Flash wondered who had given her the trinket, for it was fashioned of bone, probably the vertebra of a sheep, delicately carved and polished—a kerchief ring such as is occasionally worn by a cowpuncher to fasten the ends of his bandanna.

Nor was Flash the only one who noted it. Gazing into the mirror, he watched her as she approached Chuska Joe's booth. One of the gambler's henchmen, a squint-eyed, ratty individual, grinned at her and said:

"Where d'yuh get the doo-dad, Glorieta? It's new, ain't it?"

"What's it to you, Squint?" she returned easily.

"I don't like it," he scowled. He slipped a ring from one of his fingers and held it out to her—a ring set with a flashing stone. "This would look a heap prettier, Glorieta. Feller I won it from says it's worth seventy-five bucks. It's yore'n, if yuh'll swap it for that bone thingumajig. Is it a go?"

Glorieta smiled. "Thanks, Squint. But I don't want to swap. I'm keeping this ring for a particular friend. You keep your ring for a stake, the next time you go broke. You boys going to win the election?" As she spoke, she fingered the kerchief ring at her throat.

"Shore. But election day don't come till tomorrow. Meanwhile, how about stepping out to the dance over at Moose Hall, me and you? Yore trick's 'bout over for the day, ain't it?"

"Yes. I'm ready to call it a day. But I can't go to the dance with you. Sorry. I—I've got something else to do." With a flip of her head she tossed the chestnut curls out of her eyes.

"Yo're stallin'," Squint scowled. "Yuh don't wanta go with me. Yuh—"

Here Chuska Joe cut in, rolling his cigar between his lips.

"Lay offa her, Squint," he said heavily. "You ain't got any time tonight, see, to go gallivantin' around."

Glorieta walked through the swinging kitchen doors with an armful of dishes. When she reappeared, she had discarded her apron for a coat and hat. Flash swung slowly about on his stool, and followed her with his eyes until she had vanished through the street door.

"Yeah," he said to Supy slowly, "I'm goin' to like this town. Reckon we'll linger here awhile, Supy."

Supy groaned. "I knowed somethin' was goin' to happen. I knowed it from the time I spilt that salt in Carrizozo. Sometimes I think that carryin' a rabbit's foot don't do a body a mite of good."

Shortly afterward, as they were leaving the restaurant, Flash's foot encountered something and sent it clattering across the board sidewalk. He stooped, picked it up, and broke into a broad grin. It was the pretty hasher's kerchief ring.

"Reckon the breaks are comin' my way, Supy—and I don't pack no rabbit's hoof, neither. Lessee—just what had I better say when I hand it back to her in the mornin'?"

"If yo're wise, Flash, yuh'll take it inside and get shet of it, right now. Leave it with the hash house boss for her. I'd as soon think of gettin' friendly with as pretty a little trick as that Glorieta gal, as I would of walkin' under a ladder. No good will come of it. No kiddin'—the prettier they come, the more trouble they make."

"As I said," grinned Flash, "trouble is my dish."

"I got a good mind to see her first, and tell her who yuh are," growled Supy. "I'll tell her yo're the gent that cleaned up Socorro, that yuh got eight notches on yore gun, that yo're the one that kilt The Whiskey Kid, that yuh make yore livin' with yore gun, that—"

"You let out a cheep to her, and I'll wring yore neck," threatened Flash, grinning. "What she don't know won't hurt her."

"She'll find out, soon enough. The name of Flash Greet is known all over this here country. Soon as she hears it, she'll have yuh pegged as a gunman. And then—blooey! The skids for Flash."

"Aw, snap out of it, Supy. C'mon—let's head for Chuska Joe's dump. It sounds like a joint where we can get action for our money. I got a sockful of jack cravin' to be turned into chips."

They got action. Within an hour Supy was cleaned, and dropped out. Flash tripled his stake. Squint sat in in Supy's place, and Flash's pile began to dwindle steadily. Chuska Joe strolled among the tables, rolling his cigar between his lips, but taking no part in the play.

Flash reached in his vest pocket for the makin's. As he drew forth the tobacco sack, out rolled the bone kerchief ring he had found in front of the eating house. Squint saw it, and sneered.

"Man, yo're a fast worker," he said acidly. "So yo're the one she give that doo-dad to. Yo're the 'pa'ticular friend' she was a-savin' it for! I'll tell the cock-eyed universe Glorieta don't lose no time in pickin' the live ones!"

Flash reddened. "Looky here, yuh squint-eyed louse. Nobody give me this ring. I found it."

"Found it?" sneered Squint. "Fat chanct!"

"And what's more," went on Flash coldly, "where I come from, men don't speak the name of a decent woman in a dump like this!"

Squint laughed mirthlessly. "They don't here, neither," he snapped.

The imputation was too plain to be ignored. Flash had exchanged but a dozen words with the hasher. Yet his instinct told him she was as clean and wholesome as she was attractive. Any man could tell she was of a class apart from the women of Chuska Joe's dives, with whom Squint's remark had classed her. There was really no reason Flash should constitute himself her champion—no reason other than the instinctive repugnance of a red-blooded man when he hears clean womanhood traduced. When he spoke, it was with an icy, deceptive calm.

"Fella, I reckon that was a slip of the tongue. I'm going to give yuh a chanct to say it was. Tell these gents yuh take that crack back, and I'm willing to let it pass!"

"And if I don't?" sneered Squint.

"Yuh'll take the consequences. Yuh'll take a polecat's deserts. It's time yuh began to talk—fast and pretty!"

"I reckon," rasped Squint, "that yuh don't know who I am. When it comes to gunplay, I'm the quickest and the slickest—"

"I don't know *who* yuh are. But I know *what* yuh are!"

And Flash proceeded to tell the world, in stark, profane, unvarnished language; in words that bit like the lash of a quirt, that seared like a red-hot branding iron—in words that no man can swallow, and ever again hold up his head before his fellows. Fighting words they were, words that brought the snarling Squint leaping to his feet, his hand flashing to his holster.

The muzzle of Squint's Colt was free of its holster before Flash made a play for his own weapon. So lightning-swift were the movements of both men that the panic-stricken crowd had no time to surge back from the line of fire. Tables were overturned, chairs went spinning, the smoke-laden air was rent by frantic cries.

Four crashing reports rang out, so closely spaced they seemed almost like one. A look of startled terror flitted across Squint's face. His six-gun dropped from his hand, unfired. He clutched at his chest, tottered on his heels an instant, and then toppled straight forward. He struck the floor on his face with a resounding crash.

For an instant, silence. Then the voice of Chuska Joe boomed out:

"He's done killed Squint! Get him, boys! Nail him 'fore he makes his getaway! A hundred bucks to the one that drills him!"

CHAPTER II

The Fightin' Fool

FLASH was in a tight hole, and he knew it. It is one thing to shoot it out, face to face, with a single enemy. It is quite another to fight one's way free through a bloodthirsty mob.

Customarily, Flash kept the hammer of his forty-five on an empty chamber, which left him five shells. Four of these were empty now. And he always had scorned to pack two guns, holding that if he couldn't get his man with one, the second would be worthless. Which theory was all very well in a stand-up fight with a single enemy. But against such overwhelming odds, another six-gun would have been invaluable.

Two factors there were in Flash's favor. First, the enemy surrounded him on all sides. Unless one could press a gun against his side and pull the trigger, he was temporarily safe, for they dared not fire for fear of winging one another. Second, there was Supy. Supy was no great shakes with a six-gun. But he was a veritable raging hellcat when it came to a rough-and-tumble scrap. Supy was back there somewhere in the crowd. For the moment Flash had lost track of him.

Perhaps a score of the frequenters and employees of the joint responded to Chuska Joe's booming command. The others, while they could scarcely be counted as friends, had no stomach for a free-for-all gun battle. These were surging toward the windows and doors, or flinging themselves on the floor, where they would be less likely to stop flying lead.

Flash's first impulse was to get his back against a wall and trust to Supy and to his one remaining cartridge to nail the first man who showed fight, and thus throw the fear of hot lead into the rest of the pack. But he was almost in the center of the hall. It was as far to a wall as to the swinging doors.

All this flashed through his mind almost before the sound of Chuska Joe's voice had died away. He raised his gun and fired again. One of the two oil lamps, swinging from the ceiling, shattered into bits.

"Supy!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "Get the other lamp!"

And then pandemonium broke loose. A bullet whistled past his head. At his left, one crashing shot after another rent the air. He ducked, for he thought someone was banging away at him. He did not know it was Supy, blazing away at the other lamp, which hung near the entrance.

Then the pack closed in on him. His last shot had doused the one lamp. There was no time to reload. He slashed at the nearest head with the muzzle of his revolver. The fellow doubled up, and flopped into the wreckage of a table.

A pair of arms was flung around his neck from behind, and he felt strong fingers groping for his throat. Simultaneously a creeping figure clutched at his ankles, and sought to jerk his feet from under him.

Shooting out the one lamp with his last bullet had gained him little, for the light from the other still illumined the hall. He wondered what had become of Supy. The gun was still crashing out at his left. But his enemies were so close about him he could not tell it was Supy.

He jabbed viciously over his shoulder with the muzzle of his six-gun. He could feel it rip through flesh, could hear a gasp of pain from the fellow clinging to his back.

A mighty tug at his ankles almost upset him. He kicked one foot free, and lashed out viciously with it. The toe of his range boot caught the creeping enemy squarely under the chin. Flash saw his head snap back, saw him wilt into a sprawling heap.

Desperately he twisted sidewise, striving to shake himself free of the bulky figure clinging to his back. He succeeded merely in shifting his en-

emy's weight over to his left shoulder.

This time, instead of jabbing with the muzzle of his gun, he struck with it, a slashing blow at the head to the left of his own. He was in an awkward position, and couldn't put much steam into the wallop. But he saw the barrel smash down onto the skull so close to his own.

Blood spurted onto his cheek from the split scalp. The fellow was not knocked unconscious, but was partly stunned. Flash felt the grip of his clutching arms relax slightly. He seized one of the arms, bowed his back, and with a mighty heave, flung the foeman straight over his head. Flailing arms and legs of the hurtling body crashed into the enemy ahead of him, bearing two of them to the floor, sending the others staggering.

Instantly Flash leaped forward, tramping upon the struggling form of the fallen foe, slashing and jabbing with the barrel of his forty-five at the faces before him.

"Supy!" he cried out at the top of his voice, panting with exertion. "Douse that other lamp!"

Few of the foe knew Flash had an ally in the hall. Those who learned it from his cries could not identify his pal. Had they spotted Supy, blazing away at the lamp, he most certainly would have gone with a cracked skull or with a bullet through his ribs.

Ordinarily, even so poor a shot as Supy would have had no difficulty in shooting out the remaining lamp. But Supy was tremendously excited. Besides, he was trying to keep one eye on the mêlée centering about his pal. And so he emptied his gun without striking the lamp.

For an instant Flash's head rose above the struggling forms about him as he leaped upon the body of the enemy he had flung from his shoulders. A filled quart bottle soared through the air from the direction of the bar. It bounced off Flash's broad shoulders and thudded into the face of one of his foes, bringing forth a shriek of pain.

Supy, cursing himself for his miserable marksmanship, flung his empty six-gun at the remaining lamp. It struck the bowl, and set it swinging crazily, but failed to break it.

Flash drove his left fist into a snarling face in front of him. With a slashing blow of his gun muzzle, he laid open a swarthy cheek from ear to chin. Someone raised a chair behind him, and swung at his head.

At the same instant he lunged forward. The seat of the chair missed his head, but the rounds splintered over his skull. He staggered, and almost fell. The jagged end of one of the rounds ripped through the flesh of one cheek. Blood began to trickle down over the muscles of his jaw.

He seized the now-legless chair with his left hand and swung with it at the close-packed figures in front of him. The edge of the seat smashed into a snarling face, and knocked out a whole row of teeth.

Meanwhile Supy was wrenching a leg from an overturned table. With this club in his hands, he ran toward the front of the hall, leaped upward, and struck at the lamp.

Instantly the room was plunged into pitch blackness as the lamp shattered upon the floor. But the very next instant a tongue of flame burst into life, leaping upward from the pool of oil. By its flickering yellow light Supy saw the huge form of Chuska Joe rushing toward him.

"Here's where I take this baby!" he gasped. And he did. He swung his table leg. It smacked the proprietor of the place alongside the ear. He dropped to the floor like a heeled steer.

Supy swung about, and tore into the milling crowd like a raging tornado. He was in his element in a rough-and-tumble fight. At first it was too dark to see anything except a jumble of human forms. But Supy knew his pal was in the center of the mêlée, and that he'd be perfectly safe in picking 'em off the edges. He laid about him with his club, striking blindly.

"Wham!" he panted, as he felt the table leg crack down on somebody's skull. "That's two! I gotta make up for lost time! Bam! There's another! Sounded like cracked ribs that time! Whuf! That'n won't use an arm for a coupla weeks! Rabbit foot, do your stuff! Now's when me and Flash needs luck, and plenty of it!"

A long tongue of yellow flame leaped toward the ceiling from the pool of oil. A bartender was sousing it with schooners of beer, but with little effect. By its uncertain light, Supy saw a glint of shining steel above Flash's head.

"Duck, pal!" he screamed at the top of his voice. "They're knifin' yuh!"

But Flash was packed in so tightly among his foes he could not duck. He raised his left arm above his head in an instinctive movement to ward off the blow. The knife slashed downward. The blade sliced across the back of his hand, cutting to the bone. As the blood spurted from the gash, Flash twisted about and struck at the fellow's wrist with his six-gun. The knife clattered to the floor, and its owner shrieked in agony.

Black smoke from the blazing oil was rolling along the ceiling now. Flash's breath was coming in great, hoarse gasps. He choked and sputtered as he drew the first gulp of acrid smoke into his lungs. He struck out again and again, with gun and bloody fist, slowly forging his way toward the spot where he could see Supy working 'em over with his table leg.

And then, suddenly, another bottle came whirling out of the smoke. It clipped Supy on the back of the head, and he dived for the floor.

That was when Flash really went on the rampage. With a bellow of rage he tore into the ring of foes with tripled fury. He smashed his way through the weakened cordon, until at last he was standing over the prostrate body of his pal. He reached down and snatched up Supy's table leg.

Supy was struggling weakly, dazed by the blow. He managed to raise himself to one elbow, tried to hunch himself to his knees, and then sagged back helplessly. Then someone yelled, "Fire!"

The blazing oil was due to burn itself out within a few moments. But none stopped to think about that. Thus far everyone's attention had been focused on the fight, and little heed had been paid the blaze.

But the sudden panicky cry was all that was needed to stampede the bunch. For the first time the combatants seemed to become aware of the smoke and flames. There was a sudden break for doors and windows. In a moment Flash was left alone, over the prostrate form of his pal. And at no time since the beginning of the battle had he been so fearful of their chances.

For now they were packed in with the enemy no longer. They were in the open, silhouetted against the flames —perfect targets for the foe.

"C'mon, yuh lummix," he gasped at Supy. "We gotta get outa here!"

He reached down and grabbed one of Supy's legs. Then he lunged toward the door, dragging his helpless comrade behind him. In a moment they were enveloped in a cloud of oily smoke. And they were none too soon. Someone had overcome his panic long enough to realize their prey was escaping. A gun crashed out thrice somewhere in the room behind them. Bullets whistled past Flash's head, thudded into the door jamb, splintered through the window glass.

"Leggo my leg, yuh louse!" Supy muttered thickly as they emerged from the door of Chuska Joe's. "Whadda yuh figger this is, anyhow?"

Flash released his grip. Supy staggered to his feet. Together they darted across the street, and around the corner of an adobe house. There they paused for an instant, panting, while Flash shoved a fresh supply of shells into his forty-five.

"Man!" breathed Supy thankfully. "We'd shore of been dead meat if I

hadn't walked round my chair three times a while ago! That's one of the best ways I know to get shet of bad luck!"

CHAPTER III

Gunman's Quest

FLASH, with his teeth and his right hand, was twisting his bandanna about the knife wound on his left hand. The crowd which had so suddenly spurted from the Rosebud Monte Carlo was now clustered about outside. For the moment the fugitives were forgotten. Smoke was pouring from the shattered windows. Some, realizing by this time there was far more smoke than fire, had climbed back inside, intent on cleaning up on the chips that lay scattered about the floor of the gaming establishment.

"Our hosses," panted Supy, "are in the livery barn three blocks up the street. We can saddle up and start shovin' the country behind us 'fore they know what's what. C'mon."

"What's the big idea?" Flash demanded, breathing heavily. "A while ago, I figgered I was goin' to like this town. Now I *know* I'm goin' to like it!"

Supy gasped.

"Yuh mean—yo're goin' to stay? While that pack is aimin' to peg yore hide on their door? Are yuh loco?"

Flash laughed softly.

"Business is pickin' up, Supy. Yeah, I figger on stickin' round awhile. This is a right lively town, and I sorta admire the scenery. What more can a gent ask?"

Supy groaned. "They'll be measurin' us to fit a coupla holes in the ground, that's what they'll be doin', if we don't drag it outa here."

"Well," smiled Flash, "we all got to be buried somewheres. I'd as lief be buried in Rosebud as anywheres I know. I sorta like the name. He paused, drew forth his jackknife, and carefully cut a ninth notch in the butt of his six-gun.

Chuska Joe emerged from the gaming house, holding a swollen jaw. They could hear him cursing. Flash chuckled.

"Yuh done noble, Supy," he said. "I envy yuh the chanct yuh had at that four-flusher. First chanct I git, I'm goin' to set 'em up to yuh. Yuh scattered them tough babies like a wildcat in a herd of deer."

"My only regret," grinned Supy, "is that I didn't get a chanct to lay one alongside the ear of the gent that beaned me with that bottle. My head aches like the morning after. Let's hiper over to the hotel and get slicked up. If we're gonna stay in this man's town, I druther be washed and curried proper. Then I won't be troubled about soilin' the white satin in the coffin."

They made their way unmolested to the Pajarito House, a pink-plastered, one-story adobe structure, built about a hundred-foot patio. They found that word of their exploit had preceded them.

"You must get out of my hotel, gentlemen," insisted the clerk, half fearful of the two who had cleaned up the toughest joint in Rosebud. "Chuska Joe and his friends have sworn to kill you. I do not want violence in my place."

"Lessee," frowned Flash. "We paid for our room in advance, didn't we? So yuh won't lose nothin' when we're massacreed." He tossed a bill onto the desk. "Here's an extra five bucks, to pay for swabbin' up the gore if they slaughter us in yore hotel. Gimme that key."

"But—" began the clerk protestingly.

"Gimme that key!" snapped Flash.

"Better do like he says, fella," advised Supy. "Just in case yuh don't know, that's Flash Greet yo're talkin' to so fresh."

"Flash Greet?" gasped the clerk. "Yuh mean the gunman that killed Whiskey Kid? The gent that cleaned up Socorro? The feller that run the outlaws out of the Mogollons? . . .

No wonder—no wonder!" He tossed the key across the desk. "Excuse me, Mister Greet. I—I wouldn't of talked that way if I'd knowed it was you!"

Supy grinned. "If we have any callers, have 'em wait for us in the patio," he instructed.

The hotel was built Spanish style, with all the rooms opening off the patio. And there, to their astonishment, the bruised and bleeding warriors came face to face with Glorieta, the eating house hasher.

"I beg yore pardon, ma'am," said Flash, forgetting, as he reached for his hat, that it had been lost in the battle. He drew the kerchief ring from his pocket and held it forth to her. "Did you lose this? I found it just outside the hash house door."

Glorieta tossed the curls from her eyes with a flirt of her head. She looked him over from head to foot, taking in his bandaged hand, his bleeding cheek, his dusty, sweat-stained face. She wasted not a glance on Supy.

"Thank you," she said coldly, taking the ring and starting to turn away.

"Please, ma'am," Flash went on, "I wonder if you—"

The girl turned and cut him off sharply, her voice tinged with chilling scorn.

"I have heard what happened tonight. And I have been told who you are. So you will understand why I ask you not to speak to me again. I—I hope I never see you again—you brutal, cold-blooded professional killer!"

The color ebbed from Flash's bloody, begrimed face. He stepped back a pace, as if she had cut him across the face with a quirt. No quirt lash could have hurt like the sting of her words.

"I—I'm plumb sorry I offended you, ma'am," he apologized in a strange, flat voice. "I won't—won't trouble you no more." He turned and strode, spurs clinking, across the patio toward his room. With a scornful toss of her chestnut curls, Glorieta started for the door. She found her path barred by Supy—indignant, belligerent, loyal Supy.

"Lady," he said bitterly, "there goes the bravest, cleanest, squarest gent that ever forked a cayuse! And you've treated him like he was the dirt under yore feet!"

"Let me pass," said Glorieta icily.

"Not till yuh realize what yuh've done. Lady, do yuh know that feller risked takin' a bullet 'tween his eyes, just to keep *yore* name from bein' soiled?"

"What—what do you mean?" For the first time doubt crept into her voice.

"Just what did yuh hear about our fracas?" countered Supy.

"Why, they say he shot Squint in cold blood—murdered him!"

"Lady, was Squint a friend of yore'n?"

Glorieta evaded his eyes. "He—he wanted to be, I guess."

"Excuse me, lady, but it's a helluva friend that'll miscall a good woman's name. My pal, he never seen yuh till tonight, but he pegged yuh as bein' true blue. He aimed to make Squint swaller his words. Squint made a play for his gun. Flash let him have it. That's all."

"Is that—the truth?" asked Glorieta huskily.

"And you," went on Supy as if he had not heard, "you tromple him under yore feet like he was dirt! Him, that was willin' to face a blazin' six-gun—for you!" He laughed harshly. "Women are all alike, I reckon."

Something very much like a sob came from Glorieta.

"I—I didn't know. Truly, I didn't! What can I do?"

"You can humble yoreself, lady. You can tell him yo're plumb sorry for what yuh said. Yuh can thank him for what he done—for you. It's the least yuh can do."

"But he—he's a professional gunman, isn't he. Or is that—another lie?"

"Shore, he's a professional gunslinger. What of it? They ain't anything to be ashamed of in that, is they? He's got notches on his gun, of course. But he never killed a man except in self-defense. He never plugged anybody that wasn't trying to kill him. He never killed anybody that didn't deserve to be killed. Like this Squint.

"He's a fighter, lady, but he always fights on the side of the law. Don't peg him as a outlaw. He killed The Whiskey Kid, who was the worst outlaw in the Panhandle. He cleaned up Socorro when the law officers was plumb bluffed out. That's the kind of a gunfighter he is, lady. I'd be awful proud if I had a record like his'n."

"I'm glad you told me all this. I didn't know—"

"That ain't the half of it, lady. He's a real man, clean through. Two years ago I was a lousy bum. He drug me outa the gutter, gimme a stake, made a man outa me. I'd give him the shirt off my back, ma'am. I'd fight for him at the drop of a hat. That's what I'm doin' now, lady—fightin' to make you see him true. He's my pal. A man can't say more. But I reckon a woman can't savvy all that means."

"But who is he? Where did he come from? What's he doing here?"

Supy paused. "By rights, lady, I reckon I shouldn't tell yuh this. He never mentions his private affairs to anybody. But me, I'm his pal, and a man talks to his pal.

"Years ago, when he was a little shaver, he lived up in the Gros Ventre country in Wyoming. His daddy was a ranchman, and his ma was dead. He had a brother, Jack, that was considerable older than him. He fairly worshiped this brother, who was a curly-headed, laughin' youngster, just turned nineteen at that time. Jack was a whiz with a six-gun, and as soon as Flash was old enough to hold a twenty-two pistol, he started to learn him to shoot. He learned Flash all he knows about shootin', except what come later through constant practice.

"Well, ma'am, this older brother got into some sort of a shootin' scrape. A feller was found dead, shot through the back, and Jack blew the country. The disgrace and all killed his daddy. Year or two later a gent that was bein' turned into cottonwood fruit 'count he drug a greedy loop, squawked and says Jack wasn't the one that killed this feller, a-tall. Said it was a frame-up, and that a bandit name of Frisky Dick was the killer. Nobody knew whether Flash's brother knowed it was a frame-up, or whether he really believed, his own self, that he was the murderer.

"All this made a powerful impression on young Flash, of course. He practiced shootin' every day, till he was the fastest human with a hogleg in them parts. He swore that he wouldn't rest till he'd nailed the skunk that framed his brother.

"Soon as he was old enough, he started out. He's been driftin' ever sinct. He's lookin' for his brother, to tell him it was all a frame-up. And he's lookin' for this Frisky Dick, to square things with him. Until he finds them, lady, I reckon he'll keep a-driftin'. That's why he come to Rosebud. He's hopin' against hope he'll find one or both of 'em here."

As Supy paused, the girl shivered slightly.

"But how will he know them, if he finds them? His brother, believing himself an outlaw, would change his name. The real murderer, if he heard the truth was known, would change his."

"Lady, that's just what's got him guessin'. He never even seen this Frisky Dick. He's got a second-handed description of him, but a feller changes considerable in fifteen year. Flash only knows he's powerful quick on the draw and a quick shot, but treacherous and merciless and a sidewinder.

"As for his brother, he ain't much better off. Flash was only knee-high to a horned toad when Jack drug his

freight. He remembers him as a laughin', curly-headed cuss, yon side of twenty. Flash admits he mightn't be able to spot him by his looks alone, bein' as how they change a heap as they sprout into manhood.

"But he says Jack had a trick way of shootin', which he'd know anywhere, 'cause it's the way Jack taught him to shoot, and nobody but them two uses it. Lots of gunfighters pull the trigger with their middle finger, usin' their forefinger alongside the barrel to steady their aim. But Jack and Flash, they both steady their aim by layin' a thumb alongside t'other side of the barrel. When he sees a feller shoots like that, he'll know it's his brother. Me, I got a better system than that. I bank on a rabbit's foot—"

"The trouble is," interrupted Glorieta, "that he won't be able to recognize his brother until he sees him shoot. And then it may be too late. What if —what if Squint had been his brother? Flash couldn't have known it until the instant before Squint's finger closed on the trigger. In such a case, he'd have to —to shoot his brother! How terrible!"

"Lady," said Supy. "I know Flash. He wouldn't shoot his brother. If he ever run up against a situation like that, he wouldn't shoot at all. Sooner than that, he'd stand up and take a bullet through his own gu—'scuse me, I mean his own bel—what I mean to say is, his stummick."

Glorieta shuddered.

CHAPTER IV

Chuska Joe's Proposition

UPON returning to the room, Supy found Flash seated on the edge of his bed, head in his hands, the picture of dejection. He had washed the blood and grime away, combed his hair, and had strapped up the cuts on his face and hand with adhesive tape.

"I been talkin' with Glorieta," Supy announced.

"Yeah? I ain't interested. I wish I was dead."

"Don't talk thataway, old-timer. I usted to know a old geezer up in North Park who was allatime a-sayin' he wished he was dead. And, by golly, within ten year he *was* dead!"

"Aw, go jump in the lake. I got a good notion to take a runnin' jump, my own self."

"She lives right here in this hotel, Flash. With her ma, who's a widder lady, name of Missus Kenton. Her dad was a sod-buster, who was found dead near here, robbed of his wad and with a bullet through him. She didn't say as much, but I know she suspects Cruska Joe's gang. Winters she teaches, and summers she hashes for spare change."

Flash pretended to yawn, and peered into the blank blackness of the window.

"Oughta be nice weather for the election, to-morrow," he remarked.

"First chanct she gets, she's goin' to apologize to yuh for what she said."

"She's—*what?*" Flash leaped to his feet.

"I thought yuh wasn't interested? I said, she's goin' to beg yore humble pardon, likely on her bended knee, maybe."

Flash gripped Supy by the shoulder and shook him.

"Yuh louse—yuh been stuffing her with a lot of lies!"

"Cross my heart, I ain't," grinned Supy. "I told her yuh was a pore boy, tryin' hard to get along. I said the minute yuh clapped eyes on her, yuh decided to stop tumbleweedin', and settle down."

"I got a notion to bust yuh one!" growled Flash.

"When yuh get ready to talk pretty to her, I'll lend yuh my rabbit's foot. It always brung me luck with the ladies."

"I'm going to keep outa her way. I don't want to talk to her. I'm offa women. For good."

"Uh-huh. I know. I'll betcha forty buck that within a week you and her—"

He was interrupted by a knock on the door. Flash put a finger to his lips, eased his gun in its holster, tiptoed to the door and opened it an inch.

"A gent to see you, Mister," came in the nervous accents of the hotel clerk. "It's—Chuska Joe!"

"Yeah? Here's another dollar to pay for swabbin' up the doors. Where is he?"

"In the patio. Alone. And without a gun. He asked me to tell you that. Says he came to pay you a friendly call."

Flash turned to Supy and grinned. "Wonder what he's got up his sleeve? C'mon—let's see."

He pushed past the frightened clerk, with Supy at his heels. Chuska Joe was in the patio, rocking back and forth on his heels, with his back to them, gazing at the stars, rolling an unlighted cigar between his thick lips. He was in his shirt sleeves, quite evidently so they could see he was unarmed. As further evidence his intentions were peaceable, his hands were clasped behind his head.

Knowing by this time that Flash was a professional gun-slinger, and that he must have heard the shouted offer of a reward to any man who would "get" the killer of Squint, Chuska Joe's call was a nervy venture. Under the circumstances, if Joe had come armed, none would have blamed Flash had he started shooting on sight.

But the big boss of Datil County was nobody's fool. He must have known the best way to avoid a shooting scrape was to go to the hotel unarmed. Not even the most cold-blooded gunman would dare alienate public opinion by shooting down an unarmed man, especially when that man's back was turned to him.

Flash approached to within a few paces and said:

"You wanted to see us?"

Chuska Joe turned slowly, and as slowly lowered his arms.

"No. I come, see, to talk with *you*."

"Me and Supy is pals," said Flash shortly. Chuska Joe shrugged. When a man said another is his pal it means, under the code of the range country, that he is entitled to share in all confidences.

"They say you're Flash Greet," Chuska Joe went on, without removing his cigar.

"I always thought so, myself."

"I wouldn't of believed it, see, till I seen what you did to Squint. He had four buttons on his vest. You shot four times, and every bullet hit a button. You didn't start shooting till after he'd drawed, and then you nailed him four times 'fore he could pull his trigger."

"That's nothing," broke in Supy boastfully. "When they examined the carcass of The Whiskey Kid, they found all the fillin's had been shot outa his teeth."

"He's right handy with a gun," Chuska Joe observed. He eyed Supy distastefully, rubbing the lump alongside his ear which Supy had raised with his table leg.

"He is that," Supy admitted. "He was in a gunfight onct, and only fired one shot. But they found two bullet holes in the corp."

"Don't kid me," frowned Chuska Joe.

"S'fact," Supy assured him. "One where the bullet went in, t'other where it came out!"

"Lessee," put in Flash, "what was it yuh wanted to see me about?"

"Just wanted to let yuh know, see, that they ain't any hard feelings over this shooting."

Flash laughed shortly. "Yeah? Fella, yuh can change yore mind quicker'n a bronc can swap ends. Little while ago, yuh was bellerin' out a offer of a hundred bucks to the gent which would peg my hide on yore door."

"I was a mite excited. And that was before I'd learnt the circumstances of the shootin'. Squint always did shoot off his mouth too much. He got what was coming to him."

"I thought he was a friend of yore'n?"

Chuska Joe removed his cigar and eyed it thoughtfully as he rolled it between his fingers.

"Not a friend, exactly. He was working for me, see? He was a pretty fair hardware wrangler, but he talked too much with his mouth."

"Yeah? But what's all this got to do with me?"

"I'm coming to that. Some of the boys, see, that didn't quite savvy the lay, was all for having the sheriff salt you down in the juzgado. Not knowing who you was, them that didn't actually see the fuss said it was unpossible that you could of give Squint a even break. They said, see, that nobody could of shot Squint four times after Squint had beat him to the draw. They figgered the mere fact Squint was perforated so many times proved you drawed first. Most juries would figger it the same way, lacking evidence to the contrary."

Flash smiled. "I would be plumb glad to demonstrate on anybody that thinks it can't be done."

"Sheriff McMarr, he misdoubted it could be done. Until I fronted for you. I happen, see, to have a little drag with the sheriff. I squared it for you."

"That was right kind of yuh. Yuh musta had some reason."

"I did. You see, tomorrow's election day. Branson Colfax and his crowd of reformers want to turn Rosebud into a Sunday school. You're a stranger hereabouts, see, but I aim to put you wise. They want to run me out, and turn the Monte Carlo into a pink tea joint. They'd put Rosebud's biggest industry out of business. They want to see tumbleweeds and sotol growing in the streets. They're a lousy bunch of crooks."

"Yeah. In politics, t'other side is always crooked, ain't it?"

Chuska Joe grinned as he replaced his cigar. "I've always carried the county before, see? And I will this time, if the election is square. But this Branson Colfax, the rancher who's leading the Reform party, has got brains as well as guts. He's due to slip something over, if I don't watch my step."

"Yo're the boss of the 'wide open' party, ain't yuh?"

"The Liberal party, we call it. Yep, I reckon I'm the boss. We'll carry Chloride, the mining camp back in the hills. We concede Colfax will carry Buckskin, the cowtown out in the short grass country. He's awful strong with the cowmen.

"The big battle will be fought right here in Rosebud. Colfax, he won't stop at anything, see, to put his gang across. The side that carries Rosebud wins. He's figgering on voting a bunch of cowhands and sheepherders, that ain't permanent, legal residents. That's what we got to look out for."

"Yeah. And yo're votin' only upright, legal, permanent citizens, such as yore case keepers, barflies and dance hall gals, I reckon."

Chuska Joe rolled his cigar between his lips and grinned.

"I see you wasn't born yesterday. Well, I was sort of relying on Squint to act as a watcher at the polls tomorrow, to see that justice was done. But him being deceased so unexpected, I was wondering, see, if maybe you'd like the job."

Flash whistled softly.

"Lessee—what is there in it for me?"

"Gunman's wages for the day. Protection. And afterwards, if you want it, a soft job as chief deputy sheriff."

"And how about my pal, here?"

"Don't worry about him, see? I'll take care of him."

"And what'll my duties be?"

"To keep Colfax's repeaters from voting. We'll tell yuh who they are. All you have to do is to run 'em away from the polls. But some of these cowpunchers are right smart gun wranglers, and hard cookies. I'm warning you, they may show fight. If

they get tough, it'll be up to you to tame 'em."

"I see. What if one of 'em should stumble in front of my gun, accidental, when it went off?"

"I said I'd furnish protection. Sheriff McMarr and the prosecuting attorney are my men. If you should happen to exterminate a few of 'em, I'll provide the witnesses to swear it was done in self-defense. We got to preserve the sanctity of the ballot."

"Yeah. That's right. But what if these hard gents should gang up on me? What if some of 'em should drill me from behind? Yuh guarantee doctor's and undertakin' bills, I reckon?"

"Oh, I don't look for any trouble. Not after the killing of Squint tonight. Not after it's noised around that you're *the* Flash Greet. Everybody hereabouts knows your reputation. They know you're one of the two fastest gunmen in the whole country. So they won't start any trouble. They don't dast. I figure, see, that the mere fact we got Flash Greet on our side means the election is won."

"Yeah. Yuh say I'm one of the two fastest gun-slingers in the country. Who's t'other?"

"Lightning Dan Grady, from over at Tres Palmas. They say he's greased lightning. Know him?"

"I heard of him. Always wanted to meet up with him, to see which was fastest, me or him. But what if I don't take up yore proposition?"

"Then I reckon I'll send for Lightning Dan. But you won't turn us down. I know you gunmen. I've hired a lot of 'em, one time or another. There ain't anything you won't do, see, if you're paid enough. I know your kind."

Flash's face reddened, and his eyes narrowed.

"If yuh know my kind," he said softly, "yuh'll know enough to duck—yuh rat! Here's my answer!"

His answer was a handful of knuckles, which smacked against Chuska Joe's thick lips.

CHAPTER V

Trouble Wrangler

THE big boss of Datil County staggered back under the impact, spitting out the crushed remnants of his cigar.

"You wouldn't dast do that," he snarled, "if you didn't know I wasn't heeled!"

"Is that so?" snapped Flash. He unbuckled his cartridge belt and tossed it, with its holstered weapon, to his pal. "Hold this, Supy, while I do me a bit of bare knuckle arguin'. This Chuska gent seems plumb hard to convince. And whatever happens, don't you horn in! Remember, it's *my* party."

A slow grin overspread Chuska Joe's face. He was an inch taller than Flash, and a good forty pounds heavier. He would have been no match for him in a gunfight, but in a fist fight the advantage seemed all on his side.

"Lemme take yore place, Flash," Supy pleaded. "Swappin' wallops is my dish! Besides, I can't lose. I got my rabbit's foot—"

But before he could finish his sentence, Chuska Joe had rushed at Flash, his thick lips drawn back from yellow teeth. Flash sidestepped his first blow, and shot in a good, stiff poke which landed on the swelling caused by Supy's table leg.

"Atta baby!" Supy cried encouragingly. "Cauliflower his ear for him, compadre! Hand him a snootful of knuckles! Make him think the roof done fell on him!"

With a snort of rage, Chuska Joe lowered his head and came boring in, arms working like pistons. Flash parried the first blow, but the second smashed through his guard, caught him over the heart and sent him staggering.

Instantly the gambling house proprietor followed up his advantage. He rushed again, swinging a huge fist as he came. It caught Flash off balance. He went spinning, to bring up against

a wall with a crash. Supy groaned.

"Sock him, Flash!" he cried. "Be a badger—gnaw his guts out! Chaw him up and spit him out in chunks!"

Flash recovered. His left fist shot out like a flash of lightning. It smacked home squarely on Chuska Joe's mouth with such terrific force that it burst the adhesive tape with which the knife wound was bandaged. Blood spurted over Chuska Joe's face from Flash's reopened wound. It mingled with the blood from the gambler's torn and bleeding lips. He choked, sputtered, and spat out a fragment of a splintered tooth.

"Now yo're fightin'!" Supy cheered enthusiastically. "Twist his tail for him! Step on him like yuh would a louse! Stomp him into the ground, compadre!"

Flash lunged forward, ripped a couple home to Chuska Joe's ribs, and danced sidewise before his foe could recover. The uproar was beginning to arouse the few occupants of the hotel, who were in their rooms. Heads began to appear in doors and windows opening on the patio. The hotel clerk came darting from the office door.

"What's this?" he shrieked excitedly. "You can't fight in my hotel! Get out into the street!"

"Who ast you to horn in?" Supy demanded belligerently. "You better tuck yore tail 'tween yore laigs and hiper back into yore den, less'n yuh crave to be tooken apart and scattered 'mong the scenery! I'm here to see these gents ain't disturbed while they're settlin' their argument! Scamper along now, fella, 'fore I mistake yuh for a accident lookin' for some place to happen!"

The clerk looked at the two figures going round and round in the patio.

"But—" he began in protest.

Supy lifted Flash's gun from the holster he was holding, and flourished it in the direction of the clerk.

"Scat!" he barked.

The clerk scatted.

Meanwhile, Flash had accumulated a swelling eye. He was hammering away at Chuska Joe's face. The latter's thick lips had been battered into a sodden, pulpy, bleeding mass. But, for the most part, he had been on the aggressive. The lighter Flash had been forced to give ground almost continually.

Flash was fighting a long range fight. He would dart in, slash at Chuska Joe's face, and dance away again, usually before his enemy could retaliate. What Flash lacked in weight he made up in speed. The knife wound on his left hand was troubling him considerably, and was bleeding profusely. Chuska Joe was splattered with blood from his waist up, but it was mostly from Flash's wounded hand.

Chuska Joe lifted one off the ground, and slammed it home in Flash's short ribs. It forced a grunt of pain from him, for it almost lifted him off his feet. He feinted, pivoted, and drove his bloody left fist into the gambler's face.

"Wham!" yelled Supy. "Hand him a mouthful of loose teeth, yuh fightin' fool! Mouse his eyes! Ram yore fist down his guzzle, up to the elbow! Show him yuh pack a thunderbolt in one fist, and a hunk of dynamite in t'other!"

Both fighters had taken some terrific punishment. But Flash was breathing easily, while Chuska Joe was panting for breath. Flash's muscles were like corded copper. Chuska Joe was far from flabby, but the life he led built no sinew or physical stamina. He was beginning to play out, but he was still dangerous.

Gradually he ceased his aggressive tactics. He was content, now, to fight a standstill fight, hoping, doubtless, for an opening, a break.

Flash noted his condition, and rushed him. He ran into a wallop over one eye that caused him to see fireworks. He danced away, feinted, and came in again, weaving from side to side, dancing lightly on the balls of his feet. He lashed out with a left to

the face and instantly hooked a right to the ribs.

"Zowie!" screamed Supy, dancing up and down in his excitement. "Feed him the old one-two, compadre! Slip him a six-month ticket to the hospital! Call the undertaker, somebody! They'll be a carcass for him to measure in about two shakes of a piggin' string!"

Chuska Joe was standing flat-footed, slugging away at the dancing figure of Flash. His lips were sodden and mushy where Flash had hammered away at them. His breath whistled through his teeth. His piggy eyes still glinted dangerously. He deliberately took one on the mouth again so he could get an opening. Just one bone-crushing, pile-driver wallop from one of his huge fists might bring the battle to a sudden end, if planted fairly on a vulnerable spot.

This one landed squarely in the pit of Flash's stomach. It drove the breath out of him, left him gasping and almost paralyzed. He doubled forward involuntarily. Chuska Joe whipped over a short hook to the jaw. Flash crashed to the ground.

A groan broke from the lips of Supy.

"Snap out of it, old-timer!" he shrieked. "Don't let that big hunk of coyote bait trim yuh! Untangle, fella! Up and at him! . . . Watch out for his boots!"

As Flash went down, Chuska Joe leaped forward. Whether he intended to "give him the boots," to finish him off by kicking him into insensibility, no one ever knew. It was a common practice in the frequent brawls in the Monte Carlo. But Chuska Joe seldom took a hand in these quarrels, himself. It was to handle such cases that he employed bouncers.

Flash, dazed and groggy, heard Supy's frantic shout. Simultaneously, he thought he heard a woman's shrill scream. He rolled over and bounced to his feet. His faculties were still numb, his vision blurry.

As through a haze, he saw Chuska Joe rushing at him. He raised an arm to protect his head, and stumbled sidewise. The pain in the pit of his stomach was excruciating. His mouth was open wide as he gasped for breath.

He realized he was not badly injured; knew the breath was merely knocked out of him. Yet he knew, too, that this moment was likely to decide the winner of the battle. It he could stall long enough to recover his wind, he was confident he could finish off his foe in short order. If he couldn't—well, he'd be the one to be finished off!

His upraised arm caught Chuska Joe's blow, but failed to fend it off entirely. The force of it spun him half round. The gambler crashed into him, caused him to stumble and fall to one knee and one hand.

The impetus of Chuska Joe's rush carried him past the kneeling Flash. The latter staggered to his feet, twisting about and back-pedaling to escape the next rush. Strength seemed to surge back into his limbs as he filled his aching lungs with air. He heard Supy whooping triumphantly.

"Wow! Now yuh got him, Flash! Take yore time, fella! Get yore breath, and then mix it with him!"

Chuska Joe seemed to realize his chances of victory were slipping with every second. With a roar of rage he came charging in. But Flash was more wary, now. He knew his foe packed a knockout in either huge fist, could he but land it squarely. Overconfidence had almost cost Flash the battle already. Now he gave ground, evading each bull-like charge. His strength and confidence were returning. He knew Chuska Joe must be pretty well spent. He knew the very fury of the gambler's rushes must be wearing him down.

Now and then, as he danced away, he shot in a straight left to the face. And then, as he felt he was himself again, he suddenly changed his tactics and met one of Chuska Joe's savage rushes. For a moment they stood toe to toe, battling desperately.

"Yippee-e-e!" shouted Supy in a

frenzy of elation. "Hammer and tongs stuff, Flash—hammer and tongs! Chop him down and whittle him to slivers! Unravel him! Sock him—bust him—make him like it!"

For a moment they stood, in a turmoil of frenzied fists. It was Chuska Joe who first gave way. Flash, grinning, kept right after him, driving in at every opportunity, hammering, slashing, smashing at the big gambler's blood-stained face.

"Finish him off!" screamed Supy. "Now's yore chanct! Rock him into dreamland! Kiss him good night with yore knuckles! Paste him in the snoozer! Stretch him like a carpet!"

Flash clipped him on the chin. It was no knockout punch, but it was enough to send Chuska Joe reeling backward. The next instant the big fellow crashed down into the spiny embrace of a three-foot ornamental maguey cactus.

His howl of pain as the sharp needles pricked his flesh mingled with Supy's roar of laughter. Chuska Joe tried to struggle to his feet, but succeeded only in working himself deeper into the prickly trap.

"He's like a dog that's been messin' with a porcupine," howled Supy with streaming eyes, "only the dog can set down afterwards. This galoot will be eatin' off the mantel for a week!"

Flash reached out helping hand, and jerked Chuska Joe to his feet.

"Yuh said yuh knowed my kind," he grinned. "I reckon now yuh know it a heap better. I may be a gun-slinger, but I ain't a hired killer! The sooner yuh get that through yore skull, the better off yuh'll be."

The boss of Datil County glowered at him. "You'll be sorry for this," he muttered thickly through tattered lips.

"I'm sorry already," smiled Flash. "Sorry that I didn't knock yuh cold. Better drag yore kite, now, 'fore I change my mind and work yuh over proper!"

Without a word Chuska Joe turned and limped painfully from the hotel. For the first time Flash became aware of the dozen spectators who had emerged from the hotel rooms. And then he felt a hand resting lightly on his arm, and heard a soft voice saying:

"Did he—did he hurt you—badly?"

He found himself looking down into the anxious dark eyes of Glorieta.

"No'm," he answered stiffly. "Not half as bad as you hurt me awhile ago."

CHAPTER VI

Bullets and Ballots

A SPASM of pain flickered across her flushed features.

"Can you ever—forgive me? I didn't know—didn't realize—"

"Sure, ma'am," said Flash impassively. "That's all right. No harm done." He wiped the blood from his bleeding hand upon one thigh, groping in his shirt pocket with the other hand for the makin's.

"If I'd dreamed you—you did it for me, I'd—"

"Yuh mean the killin' of Squint. Yo're assumin' a little bit too much, ma'am. I didn't do it for you. I did it 'cause you're a woman. I'd of done it for any woman. I was brung up to think of women thataway. I may be a brute, a killer like you said, but—"

"Oh, oh!" cried Glorieta, shrinking back, her hand to her lips. "How can you be so cruel? Didn't I tell you I didn't realize—"

Flash, striving to appear nonchalant, was tapping a load of Duke's into the brown cigarette paper which formed a tiny trough between his fingers. He looked up at her as he drew the drawstrings tight with his teeth. He had told Supy he was off women, and he'd meant it. He was determined he'd never give this girl, or any other, a chance to sling the spurs into him again. He was going to take her down a peg, he was. Going to show her where to get off. Going to show her she couldn't tromple on a gent's feelings and then square it by talkin'

pretty. Women were funny animals. 'Specially the pretty ones. 'Specially this one. Well, he'd show her, he would!

He stared at her. Something he saw in her dark eyes made him vaguely uncomfortable. Daggone it all, she was making him feel all squirmy and guilty—like the time he'd shot a coyote and then discovered it was a mother with four helpless whelps which he had to put out of their misery. Flash the hard-boiled, Flash the man's man, Flash the gun-slinger, was facing a racket far more potent than anything he'd ever stacked up against before. He had faced on various occasions half a hundred blazing guns without flinching. Now he was growing helpless before the accusing gaze of a pair of soft, dark, appealing eyes.

"Aw, shucks!" he exclaimed at last, lowering his eyes. "You win, ma'am. You've acted plumb white. Like a gentleman. I've acted like a louse. I'm awful sorry."

A disgusted snort from Supy roused him from his trance. Flash turned on his pal and whispered fiercely:

"You get t'hell outa here, 'fore I wipe up the patio with yuh. Savvy?"

Supy savvied, and got. Flash turned again to the girl. She was laughing softly, tossing the curls out of her eyes with a flirt of her head.

"I'm glad—glad you feel that way." She was holding something out to him. "Won't you take this—please? Just to show you there aren't any hard feelings."

The bone kerchief ring dropped in his palm. And the next moment Glorieta was gone. Flash stared down at the trinket, and scratched his head.

"Now, what the thunder did she mean by that?" he asked himself as he started after Supy. He recalled that Glorieta had told Squint she was saving the doo-dad for a particular friend. For a particular friend!

He found his pal in their room, seated with his back to the door. Supy was talking aloud as he entered.

"Pore old Flash! Another good man gone wrong! He was a good old horse in his day, before he done got bogged down in—"

"You go to hell!" snapped Flash.

Supy arose, a feigned look of surprise on his face as he turned.

"Oh, is that you, Flash? How could yuh tear yoreself away? Yo're lookin' as foolish as a buckety calf. What's that thingumajig in yore hand? How come—"

"Button yore lip!" growled Flash, stowing the ring away.

"Plumb th'owed and hogtied!" said Supy dolefully, shaking his head. "She's got him where she wants him, ready to slap her brand on his hide, and—"

"Another yip outa you, and I'll take yuh plumb apart to see what's where yore brains oughta be!"

"Cuttin' a X in the heel of yore boot is a powerful good thing to keep the devil away," Supy volunteered seriously. "But I never heard of a charm that's worth a whoop in Hades when it comes to keepin' a woman away! If I did, I'd shore—"

Flash sprang at his pal, and choked him into silence.

"I've a notion to dehorn yuh of yore tougue, yuh mut!" he growled as he relaxed the pressure on Supy's windpipe. "Lissen, yuh half-wit. We got us a little job of business to transact 'fore we dive into the hay. Where 'bouts at d'yuh reckon we can find this Branson Colfax, the boss reformer?"

Supy grinned and rubbed his neck. "I'll lead yuh to him if yuh promise me yuh'll reform, Don Juan. When we blew into town I seen a banner stretched acrost the second story over the Rosebud Livery Emporium, readin', 'Rosebud Reform League.' And, by the way, don't yuh thing 'Rosebud's' a funny name for a livery stable? It didn't smell like no rosebud to me."

Flash collared him and dragged him to the door.

"Rise up on yore hind laigs and

prance over to the Reform League with me. I aim to chew the fat with this boss reformer. And yuh might as well get ready to change yore politics. From now on me and you is going to be ring-tailed reformers."

"At how much per vote? If they don't kick through liberal, I'm aimin' to—ouch! Don't do that, Flash. If yuh choke me dead, yuh won't have nobody for yore guardian. Which reminds me, we better look out a little bit while we go down dark streets, after what yuh done to Chuska Joe. He's liable to see can he bounce a slug of lead off'n yore skull, or hire him a spick to dag yuh one in the ribs with a scalp lifter. He's right thoughtful, Chuska Joe is. They say he never forgets the courtesies of the occasion."

Flash grinned and patted his holster.

"Old Kid Colt ain't such a slouch when it comes to respondin' to such courtesies. Let's go."

To reach the livery stable, it was necessary to pass Chuska Joe's dump. Supy made the prudent suggestion that they ooze around the block and circle the Monte Carlo to avoid trouble, but Flash vetoed the plan.

"If they get the idea I'm a-scared of 'em, I might as well blow the town right now, Supy. Long as I got the width of the street between us, I'm ready to take on the whole crew. Only thing I gotta watch out for, is their gangin' up on us at clost quarters. And with you sorta keepin' a peeled eye to the rear, we should worry ourselves pink."

Although the street was by no means deserted, they passed unnoticed until they were nearly opposite the Monte Carlo. Then a group of eight, emerging from Chuska Joe's, spotted them.

"There's that Flash gun-slinger!" someone cried.

"He's come back to clean up the joint!" cried another.

"Me for cover!" bleated a third. "I don't crave to kick off from lead poisonin'!"

They scuttled for cover like a frightened covey of sage hens. Someone else took up their cry, and in a moment the street was cleared as if by magic.

A few hours before, this never could have happened. When the lid had blown off in Chuska Joe's place, no one had been in awe of Flash, because he was unknown. They had ganged up on him as readily as if he'd been some stray cowhand.

But since his return to the hotel, the word had spread like wildfire that this rampaging young stranger was none other than Flash Greet, gunman extraordinary. He was known by reputation from one end of the state to the other. His very name inspired terror, and his exploit in outfighting Chuska Joe's henchman had done nothing to lessen his reputation. When he was seen calmly strolling down the street toward the Monte Carlo, it is little wonder they all leaped to the conclusion he was bent on the audacious project of smoking up Chuska Joe and his palace of chance. None cared to be in range when the fireworks started.

Flash grinned, and strolled on past. "A body would think we had the smallpox," he remarked dryly.

"I wished," said Supy wistfully, "that Chuska Joe would shove his lousy mug through them swingin' doors onct. I'd shore love to wiggle my fingers at him, with my thumb on the end of my nose. Though they say it's powerful bad luck to do that—with yore gun hand."

But Chuska Joe didn't give them the satisfaction of appearing. Flash and Supy reached the livery stable, and climbed a dark flight of stairs to the second floor, to the headquarters of the Reform League. In an outer room, blue with tobacco smoke, they found a group of storekeepers and cowmen gathered in earnest conversation.

At their appearance the conversation suddenly died away. It was plain to be seen that here, too, the reputation of Flash Greet was known.

"Howdy, gents," Flash said in greet-

ing. "I crave to conversate with a feller name of Colfax. Am I in the right corral?"

For a moment there was no answer. Then someone spoke up, a bit nervously:

"Do you come as a friend, or—?"

Before he could complete his query, the door of an inner office was flung open, and out stepped a man of middle age, tanned of face, wearing store clothes, with his pants legs covering range boots. Flash recognized the man they had seen in the eating house—the only male in Rosebud who had appeared to be unarmed.

"I am Branson Colfax," he said evenly, gazing at Flash with level blue eyes. "What can I do for you?" Alone of those in the room, he seemed to stand in no awe of the gunman. He was hatless, revealing a head partly bald, and a distinct line of demarcation across his forehead between the bronze of his face and the white of his brow.

"Yo're the boss reformer?" asked Flash. "If yuh are, me and my pardner craves a word with yuh—in private."

"I'm busy," said Colfax. He drew forth a fat gold watch by its whang leather thong, and glanced at it. "Set awhile, and take your turn. It'll be five minutes, maybe ten."

He turned on his heel, and passed into the inner office. Those in the outer room gasped at his effrontery in asking Flash Greet, the gun-slinger, to wait. Flash lounged on the edge of a table, built himself a quirly, and began to examine the election posters on the wall. He could hear the horses stamping in their stalls below. Gradually, in undertones, the others resumed their conversation.

Presently Colfax emerged, ushering two men from his office, and motioned to Flash and Supy. They found the inner office equipped only with a desk and a few chairs. Colfax motioned them to be seated.

"What's on yore chests?" he demanded sharply. "Spill it quick. I got a powerful lot of work to do this night."

"We're strangers hereabouts," Flash began. "We heard about Rosebud, and that you was pulling off a election here."

"I'm afraid Rosebud's got a pretty bad name," Colfax remarked.

"What's in a name?" cut in Supy. "Rosebud by any other name would stink as bad."

Colfax's face relaxed into a smile. "It'll have a better name after tomorrow. We're going to clean out the outfit that's been running things so long. Or bust a gut a-trying!"

"We come to see couldn't we help yuh out," explained Flash. "We got a hankerin' to be ring-tailed reformers. We'd be tickled pink to help shove Chuska Joe's head in the sand. We sorta crave to help tie a half-hitch in his tail. We'd be powerful glad to help yuh kick his backbone up 'tween his shoulders."

Colfax frowned. "Yo're Flash Greet, the hardware expert, ain't yuh. Yo're the feller that pulled off a killing in Chuska Joe's dump a couple of hours back? . . . Yeah. Well, I'm sorry. We can't use you. If we can't win without hired gunmen, we deserve to lose. We aim to win with ballots, not bullets. We're fixin' to trim 'em without killing off their voters. Thanks. Sorry. So long."

CHAPTER VII

Ring-tailed Reformers

"HEY, wait a minute!" cried Flash, scowling. "We ain't hired killers. If we was, we could of had jobs with t'other side in a minute. Chuska Joe, he sorta had us pegged thataway. And now he's wearin' his face in a sling.

"Mister, they say I'm the gent that helped clean up Socorro. The lay of things there was about like they are here. I could of hired up with the opposition, but I turned 'em down 'cause I never fight except on the side I fig-

ger is right. If yuh don't want us, all right. But before we go, yuh'll apologize for intimatin' we're hired killers!"

Branson Colfax stared at him long and hard.

"Chuska Joe and his crew are a bunch of hellions. His games are crooked, and them that squawk most generally have been found in some dry gulch with a peek-hole through their skulls the next morning. There have been more murders in his dives than you can shake a quirt at. 'Most every cent we pay our cowhands for wages finds its way into Chuska Joe's pockets. People are scared to come to our town. Datil County won't ever get anywheres, long as Chuska Joe is boss.

"He won't stop at murder to win tomorrow's election. I'd hoped to get by without any violence, because our Reform League stands squarely for law and order. But if Chuska Joe starts any rough stuff, maybe—"

"Excuse me," interrupted Supy. "But if yuh really want to avoid the rough stuff, the best way to do it is to have Flash Greet on yore side. As long as Chuska Joe's gang knows it means shore death to turn a crooked trick, they'll remain plumb meek and lawful. Without him on the job, election day is likely to sound like Fouth of July, 'count of the shootin' at the polls. With him, yore election will most likely run off as peaceful as a Sunday school picnic."

The reform leader frowned thoughtfully.

"There may be a heap of truth in what you say. Sort of insurance against trouble, eh? By gravy, I'd like to do it. But we've spent every penny. We haven't any money to hire any more election workers."

"Shucks!" said Flash. "We'll string along with yuh just for the fun of it, mister. Yuh needn't be scared I'll go off half-cocked. My hogleg stays right in its holster, unless somebody draws on me first. I never shoot less'n it's plumb necessary, and there ain't any other way out. I ain't a trouble-maker. I'm a trouble-shooer."

Colfax tapped on the desk with his fingers. "Boys, I've sorta taken to you two. I like yore faces, and I'm awful tickled that yuh want to join up with our side. If they's anything I've said that yuh don't like, I'll take it back.

"But here's the way things stack up. Judge Blinn of the district court, he's a square-shooter. He called Chuska Joe and me into his chambers today, and he laid down the law to us. He said he didn't give a cock-eyed whoop which side wins tomorrow, 'cause his term runs for two years yet. But he said he aimed to see there wasn't any crooked work on either side.

"He said he'd heard a lot of reports about a certain party ringin' in a bunch of repeaters. He said he'd took the matter under advisement and after givin' it judicial consideration had cooked up a scheme to uphold the majesty of the law and preserve the sanctity of the ballot, and if we both didn't fall in line he'd adjudge us guilty of contempt and lay us away on ice for thirty days. So we agreed.

"So he ordered that the election officials at each polling place keep a pot of this red-colored antiseptic dope on the ballot box. You know—the stuff yuh put on yore hide when yuh've scratched it crawling through a rusty bobbed wire fence, to prevent mortification from settin' in. And each voter, as he cast his ballot, was to have a finger shoved into this pot of red ink.

"The stuff, yuh know, won't come off until it wears off, which takes three-four days. Yuh can scrub at it all day long, and it won't wash off. Well, thataway nobody could vote but onct. Anybody that come in to vote with red fingers, we'd know he'd already voted. There just wasn't any way of gettin' round the judge's branding scheme. I agreed, and Chuska Joe, he didn't have any choice."

Flash scratched his head. "I don't see what that's got to do with us, mister."

"Just this—it means we don't need yuh. It guarantees the election will be fair and square. If it is, and Chuska Joe can't vote all his sharpers eight or ten times each, we're due to win. On the other hand, if we put yuh on as watchers, the other side might have a chanct to contest the election on the ground we was hiring gunmen to intimidate their voters. Yuh see, don't yuh, that it might do more harm than good if we was to use yuh?"

Flash shrugged his disappointment. "Maybe yo're right. But it never does any harm to have somebody handy that knows how to swing a eloquent forty-five. What if some of Chuska Joe's ladrones was to take it into their heads to puncturate you with a bullet? I see yuh don't pack a gun, yoreself, so maybe—"

Colfax interrupted with a laugh. "It wouldn't do 'em any good to exterminate me. I'm not running for any office. I'm just aimin' to see that a decent set of officials are elected, so's a honest man can get a square shake, and so Rosebud won't be a hangout for all the crooks in the country."

"Just the same," advised Flash, "yuh oughta pack a gun, mister. Fella can't sometimes always tell what's goin' to break."

"I don't believe in gun-totin'—for myself," smiled the boss reformer. "Fella might lose his temper, and do something he'd be sorry for. I've known of such cases. I'm not preaching, but—well, I quit packing a gun a good many years ago."

"I'm sorry," said Flash as he arose to go, "that yuh feel thataway about us linin' up with yuh. I was figgerin' for a minute that we'd help yuh out whether yuh wanted us or not. But if it'd really hurt yuh more'n it would help yuh, I wouldn't do it. Mister, I want yuh to know I sorta admire yuh for the way yuh look at things, and I'd be plumb proud to shake with yuh. . . . So long. And remember, if yuh happen to change yore mind, we're stoppin' at The Pajarito."

As they emerged upon the street once more, Supy uttered a sudden cry of alarm.

"Oh, my gosh, Flash! Did yuh see *that?*"

"What?" snapped Flash, his gun hand instinctively streaking toward his holster. He leaped back into the doorway, half crouching, glancing warily up and down the street.

"That—that black cat! It hipered 'crost the street plumb in front of us!"

"Yuh pore prune!" snorted Flash in disgust. "I thought we was being ambushed."

"It's worse'n that," Supy insisted. "If a black cat crosses in front of yuh, it's a sign of shore death! Oh, laugh if yuh want! Onct I knowed a feller didn't pay no mind when a black cat crossed in front of him, and within six year he was caught draggin' a long rope and found hisself danglin' from a cottonwood."

"All right," grinned Flash. "Wait'll we get to the hotel, and yuh can heave some salt over yore left shoulder, and that'll take the curse off'n us."

"But it won't!" protested Supy frantically. "Ain't nothing on earth will do it, 'cepting to circle round and shoo the cat back the way he come. C'mon, quick! It snuck in betwixt that saloon and the pawn store! We can head it off, yet!"

"G'wan and head it off, then," growled Flash. "I don't aim to waste my time shooin' kitties. I'm headin' for the hotel. You can shag cats down all the alleys yuh want to. Yo're crazy enough—like a steer chuck full of rattleweed."

"You wait and see what happens!" Supy flung over his shoulder as he took out after the cat. "*I* wouldn't take a chanct like that!"

Flash found another clerk on duty at the hotel. He unlocked the door to his room and fumbled in his pocket for a match as he groped for the lamp. And then, without warning, a gun crashed down on his head. His arms were pinned to his sides. Something

cold and metallic clicked about his right wrist.

His heavy Stetson absorbed much of the force of the blow on his head. It failed to knock him out, but sent him staggering forward, and he would have fallen had it not been for the pair of arms twined about his own.

Instinct sent his hand darting toward his gun. But with his elbows pinioned to his ribs, he was helpless as a hogtied steer. He felt his forty-five being snatched from the holster, just as the handcuff snapped about his wrist.

"Got him, boys?" came a gruff voice from the darkness. "Don't let him get his claws on a gun, or it's shore death for some of us!"

The white beam of an electric torch suddenly cut through the darkness. Flash caught a glimpse of half a dozen figures surrounding him, and then the beam was directed into his eyes and he was almost blinded. He permitted his muscles to relax, and asked mildly:

"What's the big idea of the surprise party, gents? Ain't yuh in the wrong pew, or somethin'?"

There was no answer, but the gruff voice queried anxiously:

"Have yuh amputated his artillery, boys? . . . Fair enough!"

And then, with the suddenness of a striking diamondback, Flash unhinged. With a terrific twisting wrench he flung himself sidewise. He tore himself free of the arms which had twined about him, and which had relaxed momentarily when he apparently had capitulated. He drove his left elbow backward with terriffic force, and heard an agonized gasp behind him.

Simultaneously he yanked desperately with his right arm. He hoped to use the handcuffs as a weapon, before the remaining cuff could be shackled to his other wrist. By grasping the chain which linked the two bracelets, he felt he could administer a few nasty wallops with the free cuff, and plunge backward through the doorway into the patio, to freedom.

But the handcuff did not jerk free in his grasp. With a sinking heart he realized the other cuff must be linked about a wrist of one of his assailants.

"Bend a gun bar'l over his skull!" barked the gruff voice of the leader. "But don't shoot—yuh might drill the wrong man!"

Chained to one of his captors, Flash realized escape was impossible. The most he could do would be to go down fighting; to let these cookies know they'd been in a real scrap.

With his free hand he lashed out into the darkness in front of him. His fist collided with flesh, and knocked an oath out of someone. He took a glancing blow on one cheek, ducked, and again lurched sidewise, dragging with him the fellow to whom he was shackled. He brought up against a mass of struggling human forms.

His right hand closed upon the wrist of the man to whom he was chained. An instant later his other hand found a grip alongside it. He jerked the fellow off balance, and then leaned backward and swung off his feet. Like a human scythe the fellow's struggling body cut the feet from under three of Flash's assailants.

But the force of the swing brought about Flash's downfall. The weight of his human weapon twisted Flash off balance. An instant later the two of them crashed to the floor. And then Flash was smothered under an avalanche of enemies.

When, a moment later, he was jerked to his feet, he found another handcuff about his left wrist, the remaining bracelet of which was linked about the wrist of still another of his captors. The two of them drew apart, leaving him with outspread arms, helpless. The beam of the electric torch flashed in his eyes again.

"Good!" came the gruff voice, with an air of relief. "This'n's the gunman, all right. I was afraid it mighta been his pardner!"

"I was astin' yuh," panted Flash, "what was the big idea? I always aim

to entertain my guests. I hope yuh ain't disappointed."

"I'm Sheriff McMarr," spoke up the gruff voice. "Yo're pinched."

"Pinched?" exclaimed Flash. "And what for?"

"We aim to slough yuh in the can while we investigate a little matter concernin' the murder of a gent, name of Squint. Outside of that, we ain't got anything against yuh."

CHAPTER VIII

Unjailed

"SO Chuska Joe *did* have somethin' up his sleeve!" grinned Flash. "Soon as he cracked the whip, you jumped. What yuh aim to do with me?"

"Yuh can't shoot up our town, and get away with it," growled the sheriff. "We're tired of flash gun-slingers blowin' in here, thinkin' they can run the town. We know how to handle yore kind."

Flash laughed. "Yuh ain't got any case on me, and yuh know it. There's a heap of persons witnessed that shooting will tell yuh Squint drawed first."

"And they's a heap say he didn't, too! We'll let a jury decide who's talkin' true. When they learn he was shot four times before he could fire his own gun, it'll take a armload of evidence to convince 'em he beat yuh to the draw."

"If yuh doubt it can be done, just step out into the patio, and give me my gun, and I'll be glad to demonstrate," grinned Flash. "Yore carcass will be the best evidence to convince the jury."

"There are two sides to every case," admitted Sheriff McMarr, to Flash's surprise. "Maybe yo're right. If yuh are, I'll be glad to give yuh a floater—take yuh to the edge of town and turn yuh loose, on condition yuh dust it in t'other direction."

"Yuh needn't go to all that trouble, Sheriff. I can prove my case in twenty minutes. My pal—"

"I'm afraid I ain't got the time to bother, now. And tomorrow I'll be busy, 'count of election. Maybe next day I'll have time for yore case."

"Yeah, I get yuh, Sheriff." Flash smiled dryly. He thought he could guess the lowdown on it all, now. Chuska Joe, or some of his henchmen, had seen him visiting the Reform League headquarters. They had jumped to the conclusion he had joined up with Colfax. Chuska Joe had said the mere fact that Flash would be on his side would mean the election was won. Logically, he feared the same thing might be true with reverse English—that with Flash on the other side, the election would be lost.

"And so," Flash concluded to himself, "he framed this deal. He knows he can't make the murder charge stick. All he wants is to keep me behind steel until the election is over. And the helluvit is he's liable to do it! If I'd dickered Colfax into lettin' me throw in with him, he might've unjailed me, somehow. Way it is, I'm liable to stay in the ice box with the rest of the dainties, less'n I can figger some way to pry off the lid, myself!"

"Where," asked the sheriff gruffly, "is yore pardner?"

"Up the alley, chasin' a cat."

"Don't try to kid me, fella," growled McMarr. "It won't get yuh anywheres. I'll pick him up tomorrow, if he starts anything. Yo're the one I really want, though. . . . C'mon, boys—herd him along to the crook corral. And watch him like a hawk—he's liable to pull a whizzer on us yet, if we don't keep a peeled eye on him every second!"

Ten minutes later the iron door of the Datil County jail clanged behind the sheriff and his deputies, and Flash found himself in an unlighted cell.

"Maybe there's something in this black cat business, after all," he told himself ruefully. "I'll bet if Supy was in this fix, he'd charm hisself out with his rabbit's paw. Me, I don't have nothin' to get me out with 'ceptin' two hands and a brain that seems to be limpin' slightly.

"Still I don't see why I should want to get out. The boss reformer won't let me work for him tomorrow, so there's no reason I should sprain a brain figgerin' myself free. I might as well wait until I'm turned loose. Only thing is, I hate to let Chuska Joe think he's slippin' somethin' over on me. Besides, as long as I paid in advance for a hotel room, I might as well be usin' it. And I got a constitutional contrariness against bein' cooped up by anybody, anywhere. It rubs my fur the wrong way to be penned up when I haven't done anything to deserve it. Reckon I'll snoop round a bit, and see can the roof be pried off."

His only light was the light of the stars, which came through the barred windows. He tried the bars and found them all to be solid. The jail was of brick and had been built to withstand considerable wear and tear from the inside. Besides shucking off his forty-five, the sheriff had taken his jackknife, his keys, watch and money. He tried the door. It was covered with sheet iron, and the hinges were on the outer side. The floor was of oak.

"Less'n I can chaw my way out, or bust my way out with my head, looks like I'm due to spend the night here," he admitted. "Wonder if Supy's circled round that cat yet? Wonder what he'll think when he gets back to the room and finds his pal has flew the coop? If it was *him* that had disappeared thataway, first place I'd think of lookin' for him would be in jail. But me bein' so upright and virtuous, he ain't likely to figger I'd be in the coop thisaway. Trouble is, he's liable to keep trailin' that dad-blamed pussy all night."

He built himself a cigarette and sat down on the lower deck of the bunk to think. He began going through his pockets in search of something, anything, which he might use to aid in prying himself loose from the jail. The only thing of metal on his person promising any hope was his belt buckle. He took off his belt and, more as an experiment than anything else, began testing it by scraping at the mortar between the bricks with the metal tongue of the buckle.

At first the mortar came away freely. But when he had reached the full depth of the metal tongue, the task became more difficult. At the end of an hour he had succeeded in removing a single brick from the wall and a quantity of skin from his fingers.

"At this rate," he grimaced, "I'll get a hole dug big enough to squeeze through by Christmas, and my fingers will be wore off plumb to the shoulders."

But it was the only plan which promised the least hope. And so he kept at it, hour after hour, digging away industriously, pausing only to roll and light an occasional cigarette. When dawn came he had removed but eight bricks from the inner facing of the wall. He braced himself on the bunk and tried to kick the others out. But all he succeeded in accomplishing was bruising his feet. Judging by the thickness of the wall at the window, he must cut his way through three more thicknesses of brick before he could hope to win his way to freedom.

And then, presently, he heard the jailer stirring about in the outer room. He decided to call it a day. He replaced the loose bricks, swept up the mortar, and piled the blankets on his bunk to conceal the results of his night's labor. He was tired and disgusted, and stretched himself out on his bunk at full length so the jailer would suspect nothing when he brought him his breakfast. Lying there, he noted that the ceiling was coated with ordinary plaster, and that he could reach it by standing on the upper bunk.

"If it's just plaster over lath, a gent oughtn't to have such a tough time clawing his way out," he speculated. "Wish I'd thought of it last night."

When the jailer brought him his tin pan of hash, his slice of bread and tin cup of coffee, Flash requested an interview with the sheriff.

"'Count of election, he ain't likely to be here," the jailer informed him. "Not less'n he makes some arrests and brings yuh some company."

Flash was satisfied. He hadn't really wanted to see Sheriff McMarr, but had been fishing for information, seeking to learn if that officer would be on duty at the jail during the day. For a vague plan was assuming form in his mind. He didn't know whether it would mean a clash with his captors, but if it did, he wanted to know how many he'd be up against. If it came to a tangle, he thought he could handle the jailer, even though he were armed. He had contemplated an attempt to overpower him when he brought the breakfast, but had been forced to abandon the plan when the jailer had remained outside the cellroom, merely shoving his cup and pan through an aperture in the door.

He wolfed down his unappetizing chow and then, armed with the spoon which was the only grub tool furnished him, climbed to the upper deck of the bunk. By tapping on the ceiling with his spoon he located the nearest joists. Then he hacked away at the plaster until he had chipped away an area slightly larger than his hand, and cleared a space between the laths large enough to insert his fingers.

It was the work of but a moment to rip away the lath and plaster until he had opened an aperture between the joists large enough to crawl through. In another moment he had swung himself up through the hole and found himself beneath the roof.

He had hoped to find a window by which he could escape to the roof, and then drop to the ground. But he was in inky blackness. His next best bet was to find a trap door leading to the interior of the building. Such an opening would not be above the cellroom, he knew. So he started crawling carefully over the bare joists toward the front of the building.

And then he heard a door slam somewhere below him. A moment later he detected the gruff voice of Sheriff McMarr. Flash froze, motionless, for he feared the creaking of the joists would betray him.

"How's the prisoner?" came the muffled voice of the sheriff. "Reckon I'll step in and see what's on his chest. These gunmen ain't so tough when yuh know how to handle 'em. Takes somebody like me to trim their claws for 'em."

The voice seemed to Flash to come directly below him. He knew that the moment the sheriff looked in the cellroom, his absence would be discovered. Unless he could make his getaway in the next few seconds, the game was up. Throwing caution to the winds, he started scrambling forward across the joists toward the spot where he believed the trap door to be. And then he missed his footing, stumbled and fell!

For an instant the sheriff and the jailer were too astounded to move as Flash crashed to the floor between them in a shower of plaster. They did not recognize the powdery figure floundering in the cloud of plaster dust as the prisoner they believed safe in the cellroom—until too late.

Flash, prone on the floor, snatched at an ankle and jerked. The sheriff, arms flailing wildly, toppled to the floor alongside him. Flash bounced to his feet and swung at the jailer, whose hand was already on his gun. The jailer dodged in time to miss the full force of the blow, which caught him on the left shoulder and spun him half round.

Instantly Flash launched himself at the fellow. By this time Sheriff McMarr had rolled over and was sitting up, his hand on his gun. Flash sprang on the jailer's back, hooked his left elbow under his chin, and swung him round to serve as a barrier.

As McMarr scrambled to his feet, he darted to one side in the hope of getting a clear shot. The jailer bent his uplifted right arm back until the gun, upside down, was pointed toward the man clinging to his back.

Flash could have asked nothing better. His free right hand struck at the weapon, deflected it, and then closed upon the muzzle. The jailer writhed and twisted in a desperate effort to fling him off or to swing him aside so the sheriff could bring his forty-five to bear. Flash wrenched at the six-gun and succeeded in twisting it from the jailer's fingers. He could have rapped the fellow on the head with it and knocked him cold, but this would have left him unshielded from the sheriff's hand, with a reversed weapon in his hand.

Not the least of his problems was to get the business end of the forty-five pointing in the right direction. He dared not release the left arm, which was still hooked under the jailer's chin. He flipped the weapon into the air, but the jailer wrenched aside at the same instant, and he almost missed catching it by the grip as it spun.

With a gun in his hand, Flash was the master of almost any situation. Sheriff McMarr, knowing his reputation, realized it. Before Flash could bark out a command to drop his hog-leg, the officer let it fall and grabbed for the ceiling.

"Don't shoot!" he pleaded. "I'll do anything—"

CHAPTER IX

Where to Head In

"SLIDE that gun over towards me with yore foot!" barked Flash as he shoved the jailer aside. The latter shrank back against the wall, his arms upraised, his face colorless.

"Lessee," remarked Flash dryly as he stooped and picked up the sheriff's six-gun with his left hand. "Yo're the gent that was just braggin' that yuh knowed how to trim my claws, ain't yuh?"

"I—I didn't mean nothin' by it," faltered Sheriff McMarr. "How in the name of glory did yuh ever get outa that cellroom? I thought a bolt of lightnin' had struck the jail when you came bustin' through the ceiling!"

"I chawed my way out," grinned Flash. "I got a powerful good set of teeth. I'm liable to snap a arm off'n yuh with 'em less'n yuh stand up on yore hind laigs and talk pretty!"

"What yuh going to do with us?" queried the sheriff a bit uncertainly.

"Lessee," said Flash thoughtfully. "Yuh kinda misdoubted I could shoot a feller four times 'fore he could get his gun drawed, didn't yuh? Reckon maybe I'll give yuh a gun, and then prove it to yuh."

"Yuh don't need to demonstrate," Sheriff McMarr hastened to assure him. "I give it to yuh—you can do it."

"If yuh admit that, Sheriff, yuh gotta admit I shot Squint in self-defense. That bein' the case, yuh ain't got any reason to hold me in jail. Don't yuh reckon yuh better turn me loose?"

"*Me* turn *you* loose? Run along, fella—I ain't detainin' yuh."

"That's right kind of yuh, Sheriff. I want you and yore sidekick to know I shore appreciate the hospitality yuh shown me durin' the night. So's I won't forget yuh, I'm goin' to take a couple of little mementoes with me—yore guns, I mean."

"Go ahead," said McMarr, with a sigh of relief. Doubtless he had feared a gun-slinger like Flash might put bullets through the two of them before he left.

"Where do yuh keep yore jewelry, Sheriff?"

"In my pocket. Why?"

"Fish out the bracelets—and yore keys. Now, snap one cuff round yore wrist. . . . That's good. If yuh don't mind, I'll ast yuh to step inside the cellroom. Yore hotel clerk can stay with me."

A minute later the sheriff and the jailer were handcuffed together, wrist passed through the barred aperture in the cellroom door, with the sheriff on the cellroom side of the door and the jailer on the office side. Flash tossed the key to the handcuffs out the window and paused to build himself a quirly.

"If yuh get lonesome, I may bring Chuska Joe up to keep yuh company," he grinned.

"Look here, Flash," said the sheriff in the most conciliatory manner. "Yo're a pretty good feller. Speakin' personal, I like yuh fine. Now, what's the use of makin' monkeys outa us thisaway? I'm ready to make a deal with yuh."

"What sort of a deal?" demanded Flash suspiciously.

"Well, first you turn us loose, and promise to say nothin' about bustin' outa jail, which'll save us a heap of explainin'. Then you get yore hoss and line out for some other town. I'll say I turned yuh loose, and everybody'll be satisfied."

"Why should I blow the town, Sheriff?" asked Flash. "I've sorta taken to the place. And it oughta be a heap nicer place to live, after this election. I might settle down, and run for sheriff, some day. I'll take up yore proposition, 'ceptin' that it's understood I stay right here in town."

Sheriff McMarr shook his head. "I'm givin' yuh yore chance, fella. You don't dast stay in Rosebud, anyway. If yuh try it, yuh'll be back in jail 'fore the day's over—either that, or yuh'll be a corpse. Take yore pick."

"I done tuck it, Sheriff. I told yuh onct I aimed to stay in Rosebud. Maybe it'll be in jail, like yuh say, but I been in worse jails. Maybe it'll be as a corpse, but the prettiest place in Rosebud is the cemetery. So long, boys. See yuh some more again!"

Before leaving, he discovered his own gun and the valuables which had been taken from his person. Then he calmly strode out the door and down the main street to the hotel. In response to his query the startled clerk told him Supy had returned, had been told of his arrest, and had disappeared, raging and cursing.

"I don't know what all he said," the clerk told him, "but he cracked something about a black cat, and that you ought to have known better."

"If he comes back," said Flash, "tell him I've gone down to the eating house to wrap myself round a steak."

Flash wasn't hungry, having breakfasted in jail. But he wanted to see Glorieta—wanted to learn if she entertained any prejudice against a jailbird. This time he didn't sit at the lunch counter, where his back would be to the rest of the diners, but sought out a table in the rear, where his back was against the wall. Glorieta gasped when she saw him.

"I—I thought," she stammered, "that you were—were—"

"In jail? No'm. That ain't sayin' I hadn't oughta be, maybe. Lots of folks would like to see me there, I reckon. I eased myself out, and the sheriff, he didn't stop me."

Glorieta's dark eyes were troubled.

"I—I half wish you—you'd stayed in jail. It isn't—isn't exactly safe for you to be on the streets, today. I've heard lots of talk—Chuska Joe's men. They thought you were out of the way. But now—oh, you'll be careful, won't you?"

"I'm always careful, ma'am."

"They wouldn't stop at—at murder, you know. Chuska Joe boasts that he never forgets. More than one of his enemies has been found dead—ambushed. I'm afraid—so afraid they'll—"

"Keep yore shirt on, ma'am. I mean, don't worry yoreself none about me. I can take care of myself."

"I know. In a fair fight, yes. But do you know what they've done? Chuska Joe and his gang, I mean. When you refused to side with them, and they thought you'd joined forces with Colfax, they wired to Tres Palmas for Lightning Dan Grady, the killer. They're boasting that the election is as good as won, with you in jail and Lightning Dan on their side. They say he's a dead shot and the fastest man with a gun in the country, not excepting even you."

Flash's brows lifted with curiosity at the news Lightning Dan Grady had been imported to win the election for Chuska Joe.

"That's right interestin', ma'am. It's

right fortunate I boiled outa jail when I did, ain't it? I've always wanted to meet up with this Lightnin' Dan. I've heard a heap about him.

"But without braggin', ma'am, I doubt if he's better'n me. There's only one man I know of that's quicker on the draw, and that's the one that taught me 'most all I know about hardware handlin'—my brother. And he's square as they make 'em, while this Lightnin' Dan, from what I hear, is a sidewinder, a dry-gulcher, a polecat that kills just for the fun of watchin' 'em kick."

"I—I wish you'd keep out of his way."

"No'm, Miss Glorieta, yuh don't. Yuh wouldn't ever speak to me again if I showed traces of coyote blood, thataway. I couldn't ever look yuh in the eye again if I did. And I hope to look yuh in the eye a heap, from now on. They's nothin' I druther do, ma'am."

Glorieta's color deepened, but she did not seem displeased.

"But if you should clash with this killer, and he should—"

"If we do, ma'am, they'll be a funeral tomorrow—and it won't be mine. Don't yuh worry yore pretty head none, Miss Glorieta, 'cause—"

He broke off as a group of men pushed through the door. In the lead was Chuska Joe, his face bruised and discolored, his unlighted cigar rolling between swollen, purple lips. Customarily the gambling house proprietor remained abed until after noon, but this was election day.

Flash sat and gazed at him, smiling slightly. Chuska Joe's eyes fell upon him, and the boss of Datil County went white. He spun about suddenly and stampeded through his companions, bolting out the door.

"It's Flash—the gunman!" someone cried. "He musta bust outa jail!"

There was a break for the door. Chuska Joe's startled and panicky henchmen surged out, close on his heels.

"I don't know why they should do that," said Flash, smiling dryly. "I'm right sorry, Miss Glorieta, if I seem to be drivin' customers away from the eatin' house. I didn't go for to do it—honest. Maybeso they think I've got the smallpox, or somethin'. They shore ain't very sociable, are they?"

Glorieta tossed her curls from her eyes and breathed a deep sigh of relief.

"I thought they were going to—make trouble. It must have given them quite a start to find you here when they thought you safe in jail. Where are you going now?"

"Me? Why, I hadn't figured on going anywheres, special. I sorta aimed to set around and talk awhile, if yuh didn't mind. But if yuh—"

Once more he was interrupted. This time is was Supy who came bursting through the door. Flash called out:

"Still lookin' for that pussy? I ain't seen it in here."

"Aw, go jump in the crik!" retorted Supy as he strode toward Flash's table. "I circled round that midnight yowler hours ago. And as a result, I ain't slept in no jail, neither, like some folks that wouldn't pay no mind to such warnin's."

"Where yuh been keepin' yoreself?" grinned Flash. "I was sorta expectin' yuh to come to my aid, and at least toss yore rabbit's hoof through the jail window to me. I s'pose if yuh ain't been chasin' cats all night, yuh been poundin' yore ear while yore misfortunate pal was a-languishin' in the juzgado."

"Ain't I been doin' my daggonest to disincarcerate yuh?" Supy protested indignantly. "I ain't had a wink of sleep—all 'count of runnin' myself ragged tryin' to spring yuh. And just when I've framed things to ease yuh to liberty onct more, what do yuh do, yuh ongrateful louse? You unjail yoreself, that's what yuh do! Lady, if that ain't ingratitude for yuh, I'd like to know what is! Ain't it the truth, ma'am?"

Glorieta refused to commit herself. Flash assumed an air of solicitude.

"What yuh been doin', Supy? Spendin' the night heavin' salt over yore

shoulder to take the curse off'n me?"

"Well," admitted Supy, "I *did* do some things calculated to stave off bad luck. But I done more than that. I figgered and sweated and milled it over in my mind a long time, and then I hunted up Colfax, the boss reformer, to see wasn't they some way he could snake you outa jail. He says he was powerful sorry, but as long as he hadn't made any deal with yuh, 'twasn't up to him. I wrangled with him so long he cussed me and run me out.

"Well, I happened to remember a scheme which is awful good to bring good luck, and which is also used to get rid of warts. But to work it I needed the tails from three mice and the ears off'n a bat, and when I tried to get 'em folks thought I was drunk and I almost got in trouble, so I had to pass it up.

"I did some more powerful thinkin', and got me a scantlin' and started for the jail to pry the bars off'n a window. But on the way I heard Chuska Joe had wired to Tres Palmas for Lightnin' Dan Grady. It was 'most daylight by that time, but I routed Colfax out and told him his only chanct to save the day was to spring yuh outa jail and line yuh up on his side. I talked like a Scandihoovian uncle and, by golly, I convinced him!

"Me and him, we hunted up Judge Blinn, and then we went to the jail. That was half an hour ago. We found the sheriff and the jailer chained together, madder'n a bronc with a burr under the saddle blanket. I've heard some tall cussin' in my time, but man, I gotta hand it to that sheriff! He's the eloquentest sheriff ever I hear.

"He swore he was goin' to organize a posse and corral you and slam yuh back in the can and keep yuh there till yuh rotted. Colfax told him to take himself another guess, and flashed the paper in his face we'd got from the judge. He said he'd come to habeas corpus yuh outa jail. Told him if he dared lay a finger on yuh without a warrant from the court, *he'd* be the one in jail. He said you was a ring-tailed reformer, now, and you was goin' to show Chuska Joe and Lightnin' Dan and the sheriff and the whole kit and kaboodle of 'em where to head in!"

CHAPTER X

The Lid Blows Off

"SO Colfax done changed his mind about me, did he?" asked Flash after a moment's silence. "Decided to fight the devil with fire, I reckon."

"Well, he craves to see yuh, right away. He ast me to round yuh up and haze yuh down to Reform headquarters. So I come here, right off. I knowed where to find yuh."

Glorieta flushed prettily, tossed the curls from her eyes and hurried away to attend the needs of another customer.

"And," continued Supy, "when I seen Chuska Joe and his boys a-boilin' outa the door just now, I says to myself, 'Flash is there, shore enough.' So swaller that coffee and pie, and let's get goin'."

"Wait a minute," said Flash between gulps. "I ain't finished talkin' with Glorieta."

Supy shrugged and sighed hopelessly. Then he began to sing softly, "Glory, glory, Glorieta—" Flash threatened him with a wedge of pie. He ducked, scurried away, and waited resignedly by the door, until his pal finally joined him. Together they hurried to the Reform League headquarters. Flash's appearance on the street was the occasion for many an anxious look and whispered conversation, for, while news of his arrest had spread through the town like wildfire, word that he was out again was not generally known.

They found Colfax's headquarters bustling with activity. Every buckboard, buggy and surrey in the Rosebud livery had been hired to convey voters to the polls, and they now were being decorated with Reform League banners. Colfax admitted Flash and

Supy to his private office immediately.

"It's hard to keep a good man in jail, isn't it?" he smiled. "Supy's told you I've changed my mind, I suppose."

"Yeah. He said Chuska Joe is importin' Lightnin' Dan Grady to persuade the voters, and that yuh decided a counter-persuader wouldn't do no harm."

Colfax regarded him with steady, appraising eyes. "I'm not hiring you to make trouble. I'm hiring you to prevent it. I want no intimidation of the voters on the other side. But I want you ready to go into action if this Lightning Dan starts any rough stuff."

"Yeah. I savvy. But why not settle it right away? It'll save time and trouble. I'll hunt up this firearms-walloper from Tres Palmas. If he's feelin' right wolfy, he'll start somethin'. And I'll finish it. And everybody'll be happy."

The boss reformer shook his head decisively. "In the first place, he can't possibly reach Rosebud before the four o'clock train this afternoon. At that, he'll be in plenty of time to raise hell with a lot of voters. A lot of the tie-hacks can't get in until just before the polls close. We've got a big Mexican vote that can't ballot till after working hours—a class that's mighty easily intimidated. All I want you to do is stand by, ready to go into action when I give the word."

Flash sighed regretfully. "How will I know this Lightnin' Dan when I see him? I never laid eyes on him, yuh know."

"Neither have I. But I've heard a heap about him. He's a curly-headed gent with blue eyes, about—well, about twelve or fourteen years older'n you, I should say. And he has a trick way of shootin', they say. Just what it is, I never been able to find out, exactly."

Flash stared at him in silence. Curly hair and blue eyes—like his missing brother! About the same age his brother would be. With a trick way of shooting—like his brother! Moreover, by reputation Lightnin' Dan was a more accomplished gun-slinger than Flash himself. And to the best of Flash's knowledge, there was but one person in all the country more skilful with a six-gun than Flash himself—his missing brother, Jack!

"Do yuh know anything more about this Lightnin' Dan?" he asked presently. "Where he come from, original? Or whether he's wearin' his right name?"

Colfax shook his head. "He never talks about his past, they say. The only gent that ever ast him died of lead poisonin' a minute later. A killer like he is ain't likely to have a past that'll bear close inspection. Nor he ain't likely to be using his real name, neither. Why d'yuh want to know?"

Flash shrugged. "Thought maybe I might of run acrost him before—under another name."

But Flash was far from being as calm as he appeared. Disturbing thoughts were racing through his mind. If Lightning Dan Grady were really his brother, what a helluva fix it left him in. When it came to the inevitable showdown, what could he do?

But Flash knew well enough what he'd do—if he were really convinced the other gunman was his brother. He could never bring himself to shoot his own brother. He'd hold his own fire, and take it between the eyes, sooner than do that!

"If I could only find out beforehand!" he said to himself. "But I reckon that's plumb unpossible. Nobody would know about that old shootin' except Jack himself, and he wouldn't ever tell. If I ast him, it would only start the fireworks—like with the feller Colfax says ast him onct.

"The helluvit is, they ain't any way in the world I can tell if it's Jack until the instant he begins shootin'. Curly hair and blue eyes are so common, they don't spell nothin'. The only shore way I can tell is by watchin' to see if he steadies with his thumb while he shoots. That leaves me about a billionth part of a second to decide."

All this passed through his mind in an instant. He shrugged again and said:

"All right, mister. I won't go out of my way to start anything with him. But if he makes the first play—well, I'll act accordin'."

What else was there to do, he asked himself. It looked as if he were due for a nasty jam. And yet he couldn't duck out on such slender evidence—evidence that, after all, was merely an uncomfortable suspicion.

"Shucks!" he said to himself, as he strove to dismiss the uncomfortable possibility from his mind. It just can't be possible that Lightnin' Dan is my brother! Why, Dan's a killer—a treacherous, cold-blooded killer, from all I've heard. And my brother was as square as they make 'em. I'm bankin' on that. I got to."

When he spoke to Colfax again, he appeared perfectly at ease.

"How did yuh work this habeas corpus gag on the sheriff?" he asked. "Looks like yuh got him hogtied with a string of red tape. I'm no law sharp, so I don't exactly understand it."

"The law won't stand for anybody being held in jail without an official charge being lodged against him," Colfax explained. "Some of these sheriffs get away with it with prisoners that don't know their rights. McMarr can jail you again, if he wants to take the responsibility of swearing out a warrant charging you with murder.

"But he won't. He knows that no jury would find you guilty, because you have a perfect case of self-defense. That means you could sue the shirt off'n his back—slap a judgment onto him that would wreck him. It's a risky business trying to railroad a gent to the gallows. And after all, the important thing from their standpoint was only to keep you on ice over election day. As long as Chuska Joe isn't in control of Judge Blinn's court and can't pack a jury on you, you needn't worry."

"I was on a jury onct," chimed in Supy. "We was tryin' a Spick which had killed his mama and papa. We was sorry for him 'cause he was a orphan, so we turned him loose."

"You was lucky you was *on* a jury, 'stead of facin' one," Flash remarked. "With a face like yore'n, any jury'd give yuh life. If I was a juryman and you was on trial, I'd shore vote to put yuh out of yore misery."

"Lay off, you two," cut in Colfax, smiling. "Flash, you better amble over to the polling place. Just set around, so's to be on hand if anything pops. Don't try to swing any votes, and don't start an argument with anybody. But if any of 'em get heavy, you know what to do. Keep a shinned eye on the ballot box and on Chuska Joe's election officials, to see they don't slip anything over. And be certain sure that every voter that casts a ballot sticks a finger in that pot of red dye, so there can't be any repeating."

"And how about me?" demanded Supy.

Colfax gazed at Supy reflectively for a moment.

"Well, fella," he said finally, "you been up all night, chasing cats and getting your pal out of jail, and you must be pretty sleepy by this time. You might as well hole up and grab off some sleep. Y'see, things are likely to be pretty quiet this morning. So I figure we don't need a good man like you until afternoon—until the time Lightning Dan is due to arrive. That's when we'll need a scrapper like you. You show up here this afternoon, and I'll give you something to do."

"Aw, shucks," grumbled Supy. "Somebody's always takin' the fun outa life. Nobody can hold a first-rate, enjoyable election without a few good fights. What d'yuh s'pose the boys come to town for, anyway, on election day? I ain't so shore I'll bed myself down and sleep. Reckon maybe I'll prance around on my hind laigs awhile, and see if I can stir up a little excitement."

"If you start any trouble, you may

find yourself prancing into the dooley house," threatened Colfax, still grinning. "You're likely to have your bellyful of fighting if you wait till afternoon. I want to have you on hand if the other side starts anything, but I don't want anybody on our side upsetting the apple cart."

"This is a helluva election," protested Supy, still grumbling. "I feel like goin' out in the back yard and eatin' horned toads. All right; I promise I won't start any rough stuff. So long, Flash. See yuh at the eatin' house at lunch time. I know nothin' could keep yuh from eatin' there."

Colfax laughed when Supy had gone.

"He's a good hombre," he said to Flash, "but you can tell from his looks he likes to fight. I'm afraid he might go off half-cocked and spill the frijoles."

"Then," said Flash, "yuh oughta ordered him to stick with me. I can ride him with a curb bit, but if anybody else tries to use a check rein on him, he unhinges like a mustang somebody's touched up with hokey-pokey. He's a one-man pal, that gent. If nobody rubs his fur the wrong way, he's liable to go to sleep, and yuh won't have no trouble. But if somebody tromps his toes, he's dynamite."

Flash pulled out and made his way to the polling place. It was as peaceful as a meeting of the Ladies' Aid. Chuska Joe's election officials were suspiciously amiable. Their boss had sent over a quart of his best, and his henchmen "set 'em up" to the crowd. Flash took one snifter, just to show there were no hard feelings. But after that he laid off, for he knew he must keep his brain unmuddled, his nerves steady and his senses keen.

The voters were laggard, at first. Some balked at dipping their fingers in the dye pot, but when they were told, "no dip, no vote," they gave in. It was not until almost noon that the serenity of the occasion was ruffled. Six residents of the Mexican settlement of Giudad Piojo appeared and demanded ballots. Five had scarlet fingers, so they were challenged by both sides, as repeaters.

"On yore way, hombres," ordered Flash. "No repeatin' goes. Yore claws are red, which shows yuh already voted. Vamose!"

But they protested so vehemently and convincingly that he consented to listen to their explanation.

"On our way here," said their spokesman, "a most affable gentleman met us, and inquired which way we were going to vote. When we told him, he held out a bottle of—how do you say it?—maraschino cherries, and told us to help ourselves. That is how our fingers became stained, señor—the syrup would not rub off!"

"But no," horned in the sixth Mexican. "I, too, plucked a cherry from his bottle. And see! *My* fingers are not stained! They lie, señor!"

A great light was beginning to dawn on Flash. "You boys," he asked the five, "told this gent yuh was goin' to vote the liberal ticket, didn't yuh?" They nodded. "And you," to the sixth, "you told him yuh was votin' Reform, huh?" He bobbed his head and replied, *"Si, si, señor."* "And did yuh notice, was it different bottles he handed yuh? Yeah? And this gent, he was a chunky, hard-boiled Americano, warn't he? Uh-huh. I thought so! Supy, he's done figgered out his own scheme for winnin' this here election. I better go out and wring his neck, 'fore he's dyed the fingers of all the opposition voters red!"

CHAPTER XI

The Hole Card

IT was Supy's attempt to slicker the opposition which really upset the apple cart. Of course, Chuska Joe's henchmen raised a terrific howl. Branson Colfax agreed that the five red-fingered Mexicans should be permitted to vote.

Immediately the polling place was overwhelmed with voters who claimed

their red fingers were the result of accepting Supy's invitation to have a cherry. Some of these undoubtedly were legitimate. But the bulk of them, Flash knew well enough, were repeaters, sent back to the polls by Chuska Joe, who was shrewd enough to take advantage of this break in his favor.

"Supy, the pore galoot, figgered he was slickerin' the opposition outa a few votes," Flash grumbled. "Instead, he maybe has slipped the election to Chuska Joe with his doughhead trick. Judge Blinn's scheme to prevent repeatin' looked shore fire on the face of it, but Supy figgered out a way to beat the game. He bought him two bottles of cherries, emptied the red juice outa one, and filled it up again with red dye. This is the one he offered to everybody he could spot as a opposition voter, and they couldn't get a cherry without gettin' their fingers dyed. If there was a Reform voter to which he had to offer a cherry to avoid suspicion, he offered him t'other bottle, which contained the original red syrup which could be wiped off or washed off or, mostly, licked off."

The Rosebud polling place was speedily plunged into a condition of chaos as Chuska Joe began sending in red-fingered voters to demand a ballot. Flash and the Reform ticket election official fell for the first of these, and permitted them to vote. Having thus established a precedent, they almost caused a riot when presently they "got wise" and began to challenge the "crimson ramblers."

It was Flash who finally rared up on his hind legs and announced no more pink-fingered votes would be accepted. His ultimatum almost touched off the powder barrel. With considerable justification on their side, Chuska Joe's men protested it was a ring-tailed reformer who had started the shenanigans, and that having admitted a score of red-fingered voters, the Reform officials couldn't consistently bar the others.

But Flash stood pat.

"Maybe we will bar a legitimate voter, here and there," he said. "But yuh already slipped acrost a heap more than we might bar. I've called off this solid-skulled cherry hound of our'n, so you ain't goin' to lose no more votes. That's my hand, and if yuh don't like it, yuh know what yuh can do!"

Ordinarily, this would have been the signal for gunplay. Nothing but Flash's deadly reputation prevented it. None cared to force the issue with a gun-slinger who could back up his arguments with hot lead and cold nerve and a forty-five that never missed.

The opposition went into a whispered conference, after sending an emissary to Chuska Joe to report the situation. Thereafter they made violent verbal protest whenever a rosy ambler was barred from voting, but always drew in their horns before matters could reach the gunplay stage. And after a while the red-finger gentry demanding a vote became less frequent.

Branson Colfax, wearing a worried look, showed up shortly after noon for a council of war with Flash who, because of the tenseness of the situation, had been unable to go to the eating house for lunch.

"If it wasn't for that dumb pal of yours, we'd be sitting salubrious," he confided. "I wish we'd hogtied him, or something. Out in the county, things are going about as we expected. They'll carry the hard rock precinct back in the hills, and we'll cop the short grass precinct easy enough. The result in Rosebud will tell the tale—and every vote counts!"

"And some counts double, seems like."

"Yep. We're riding easy right now, but I'm worried about this afternoon. From what I hear, they're banking on Lightning Dan. When he shows up, things are due to pop. If they could get rid of you, they could run in these repeaters easy enough. They figure Lightning Dan can shoot you out of the picture, and then it'll be a walk-away for them.

"That's why they've called off most of their red-fingered repeaters. They're saving 'em up to flood the polls after Lightning Dan arrives, and you're eased off via the Colt route."

"Yeah?" queried Flash, dragging at his quirly. "If that's all, what yuh worryin' yore head about? I'll handle this Lightnin' Dan all right, unless—"

"Unless—what?" asked Colfax, still plainly worried.

"Oh, nothin'," Flash replied. That uncomfortable suspicion that the gunman from Tres Palmas might prove to be his missing brother had bobbed up again. He was confident enough he could handle Lightning Dan, unless—and this is what had been on the tip of his tongue when he broke off so suddenly—unless the gunman turned out to be the long-sought Jack. In such an event—well, he knew he could never bring himself to shoot his own brother. And so he added, merely: "Barrin' accidents, I mean."

"Well," Colfax went on, "you keep your eye peeled. Don't let 'em slip anything over on you. Be careful you don't give 'em a chance to take a potshot at you from behind. Not that I'm looking for anything like that. None of 'em want to take the risk, when they're counting on Lightning Dan turning the trick when he gets here."

Flash grinned. "If they get me, you'll hafta come down and take my place, mister. A ranchman like you, oughta be pretty handy with his hardware. I'll bet yuh could sling a nasty forty-five, if yuh'd a mind to. Funny yuh don't go heeled, 'specially on a day like this, when the hubs of hell are likely to burn out a bearin'."

"I got a prejudice against burning gunpowder," said the boss reformer as he started to turn away. "Besides, being head of the Reform League, it wouldn't look just right if I was to go round brandishing deadly weapons, so to speak."

An hour after the departure of the boss reformer, Supy, breathless and excited, burst into the polling place.

"Have yuh heard what's happened?" he panted, drawing Flash aside.

"I know it ain't Friday, the thirteenth," grinned Flash. "Nothin' much worse'n that could happen, could it? Or did yuh lose yore bunny's hoof, or somethin'?"

"This ain't no joke," Supy protested breathlessly.

"If it turns out yuh been feedin' cherries to the voters of Rosebud again, I'll say it ain't no joke. To show yuh how I appreciate what yuh done, I'm liable to bend a Colt over yore skull!"

"It—it ain't that. It's—Glorieta!"

Flash gripped him fiercely by one arm.

"What's that? If yo're kiddin' me, I swear I'll—"

"Ouch!" gasped Supy. "I'm not foolin' yuh. Chuska Joe and his crew—they got her!"

"Got her? What d'yuh mean?"

"Took her away. Kidnaped her, I guess. Slung her into a surrey as she was goin' from the eatin' house to the hotel. Drove outa town with her, lickety-larrup. And her screamin' bloody murder, and yellin' for you—until somebody clapped a paw over her mouth!"

"Yellin' for me? Why, I've only knowed her sinct yesterday!"

"Didn't I hear her with my own ears? I was a block away, and before I could get there they'd drove away. I didn't dast shower down on 'em with my lead-sprayer, for fear of wingin' her."

"Quick, man! Which way did they head?"

"Out the foothills road, towards Chloride. Are yuh linin' out after 'em?"

"Am I? Watch my smoke! Looky here, Supy—you got to hold down this job while I'm gone. You got to set on the lid and bear down hard. Can yuh do it without flyin' off the handle? Can yuh keep a level head? Can I trust yuh to—"

"G'wan and rescue the fair maiden, pal. I'll set steady in the boat while yo're away. In fact, I was expectin'

somethin' like this, so I saddled up yore hoss, and—"

"Atta boy, Supy! Yuh ain't so dumb as I thought yuh was! Keep one hand on yore rabbit's foot and wish me luck, compadre. I won't be gone long—less'n it's necessary!"

Flash dashed out the door, vaulted into the saddle of his waiting horse, and tore off down the street in a cloud of dust. He followed the foothills road, where he could make out without difficulty the prints of the surrey wheels in the dust.

"Now, what in the name of Mountain Standard Time was their object in doin' that?" he asked himself, mystified, as he pounded along in pursuit of the vehicle. "Chuska Joe must be behind it. But why? I don't know much about past history of folks in Rosebud, but I never heard that he'd taken any pa'ticular shine to her. For one thing, he knows better. He knows she ain't the type of them fairy belles that rustles for him in the Monte Carlo. He knows that while she'd treat him civil in the eatin' house, she wouldn't be seen walkin' down the street with him."

The road had entered the foothills, and was winding along in a ravine, following the rocky bed of a dry creek. The northern faces of the hills were covered with sparse growth of scrub cedar and piñon pine, while the southern exposures were barren of tree growth and carpeted with sagebrush. Although he had never been in the Rosebud district before, he knew from the mention of the tie-hack voters, that farther back in the kills would be found a region of big timber.

"And for another thing," he told himself as he fed his horse the steel, "Chuska Joe's takin' a awful chanct in pullin' a trick like this. It may cost him the election, and maybe a bullet under his hide. In this part of the country a gent may be a crooked gambler, a hoss thief, or a killer, and still get by as long as his victims is only he-males.

"But when he starts his monkey-shines with decent women folk, then he's got the whole country to fight. That's one thing the folks hereabouts won't stand for. Every man's an enemy of a cuss like that, and he's due to be stomped out like a snake.

"When the Rosebud voters hear about this, they're likely to bury Chuska Joe's gang under a snowslide of ballots. But I reckon he's wise enough to dust his tracks over. It ain't likely that he himself is takin' part in this kidnapin'. It's prob'ly some of his half-breed cutthroats he's hired pulled the job. Well, he'll most likely be minus two-three hired hands when I get within shootin' distance of this crew."

Rounding the next turn he encountered a wagonload of burly tie-hacks, headed for Rosebud to vote.

"Hey, you boys," he shouted as he drew rein in a cloud of dust. "Seen anything of a rig with two-three men and a girl in it, headin' up this road?"

"Yuh mean," asked the driver of the lumber wagon, "a two-seated serry without a lid? Yeah, we passed such a rig, whoopin' it up hell-bent for somewheres, 'bout a mile back. You from Rosebud? Say, how's the election goin'? Is it true that the two best gunmen in the country have been hired up on opposite sides, and are due to shoot it out—"

But Flash, the instant he gained his information, roweled his horse and catapulted away like a bat out of Hades.

"I oughta catch up with 'em pretty quick, now," he told himself eagerly. "They can't make near as good time in that contraption as I can on the hurricane deck of this buckskin bullet hoss. Tear loose, yuh hammer-headed cross between a scared jackrabbit and a streak of lightnin'! Show some speed! Shake a hoof! Let's see how fast yuh can shove the country behind yuh!"

He was leaving the foothills behind, now, and entering the real mountain

country. The ravine became a narrow canyon, with sheer sandstone walls, and the grade was growing much steeper. He knew Glorieta's fleeing captors could not maintain their breakneck pace for long.

He swung around an immense shoulder of red sandstone and saw his quarry, just disappearing behind a jutting crag, only a quarter of a mile ahead. With an exclamation of grim satisfaction he urged his buckskin forward.

As he swung around the jutting crag, a rifle bullet thrummed past his head with a menacing whine.

CHAPTER XII

Springing the Trap

FLASH was armed only with his six-gun. Against an enemy equipped with .30-30's, he was virtually helpless.

"Before I can get within revolver range, they can pop me off as easy as if I was a dummy target in a shootin' gallery," he admitted glumly. "And even if I could get within the outside range of my forty-five without bein' made a sieve of, I wouldn't dast shoot for fear of wingin' the girl. I've caught up with 'em, all right, but I'm as helpless as if I was still back in Rosebud!"

He lagged behind a bit, seeking to devise some workable plan. The moment the surrey had rounded the next turn, he spurred his horse forward at a headlong gallop, hoping to get close enough before becoming exposed to their fire, so he could bring his six-gun into play.

But the only result of his experiment was to draw several more hornetlike rifle bullets. One sang past so close he could feel the wind of it fan his cheek. And he failed to get within twenty yards of outside revolver range.

"Couple more tries like that, and my carcass will be blockin' traffic on the road. I don't mind facin' bullets, long as I'm clost enough to sling a few my own self. But it won't get me nowhere to stand up and let 'em use me for a target. If I hope to snake Glorieta away from 'em, I got to keep my hide whole. It's a cinch I can't help her none if I let 'em turn me into a corp.

"If I was out on the plains, it'd be simple enough. I could circle round, and come up on 'em from the side, 'cause I can travel faster. If I could get in a side shot, even from an outside range, I could easy drop one of the hosses without any danger of hittin' Glorieta. But they built the walls of this canyon so daggoned steep and clost together—"

He broke off, to make an inspection of the canyon. If he could climb to one of the ridges above, get ahead of them and lie in wait for them behind the protection of some rocky barricade—

But the canyon walls ahead were too sheer to climb. He knew not how far it would be before they would widen out enough to permit him to scale them. And time was precious!

Even now he had been gone far longer than he'd expected. He wondered what was happening in Rosebud. He felt guilty that he had left Supy to take his place. Of course, he had expected to be back well before the arrival of Lightning Dan. But now it appeared that this was out of the question. Had he left Supy to cope with the Tres Palmas gunman alone?

"Supy's got the guts, all right," he told himself, "but he simply hasn't got the trick of shootin' quick and true. If he goes up against this Lightnin' Dan, he'll be riddled before he can even draw. And it'll all be my fault!"

But he could not abandon the rescue of Glorieta. He recalled having passed a chimney a few hundred yards back, a narrow cleft in the canyon wall which promised a means of reaching the ridge above. It was his best bet, although it meant further delay. He whirled his buckskin and galloped back.

The chimney was steep—too steep to climb while in the saddle. Flash dis-

mounted, and led the buckskin, scrambling up treacherous stretches of loose slide rock. In ten minutes he had reached the top of the canyon wall, but not of the ridge.

He lined out along the timbered slope, hoping to pass the surrey and reach a place where he could descend. But his progress was impeded by down timber which slowed the buckskin to a walk. There seemed no prospect of better traveling ahead. Cursing his luck, he headed the buckskin straight up the slope, hoping to find open country where he could make speed.

On the crest, he found himself looking down into another canyon on the farther side. And then, with a start of surprise and satisfaction, he realized it was the same canyon! From the spot where he was, he could see it swinging around in a huge U-bend, doubling back on itself. Because of the steepness of the canyon walls, he could see the road in but one spot, but could discern no trace of his quarry.

"Here's where I nail 'em," he told himself exultantly as he headed his mount down the slope. Here he found much easier traveling, except for the last two hundred feet. Once on the road again, he examined the dust, but could find no tracks. He heaved a sigh of relief, for he knew he was in time!

He looked about him, seeking a place where he could hide his horse and some spot, not too far distant, where he could conceal himself. But even as he stood there he heard the sound of hoofs and the crunching of wheels.

A hundred yards below him the road made a sharp turn. He vaulted into the saddle, touched the buckskin with the spurs and, as he reached the shoulder of sandstone at the inside of the turn, swung his right leg over the horn for a running dismount. He whipped out his gun and darted behind his horse, close against the sandstone wall. He hoped to take the kidnapers by surprise; to stick 'em up the instant they rounded the turn, but thirty feet from the spot where he stood.

He succeeded only in part. They had heard the pounding hoofs of his buckskin. But they scarcely could have expected the horseman to be the one who had been behind them so recently. Nevertheless, as the vehicle rounded the sandstone shoulder, the fellow on the front seat beside the driver had his rifle in readiness.

"Up with 'em!" barked Flash. "Claw the atmosphere, gents!"

His answer was the roar of the rifle. But Flash's forty-five barked at the same instant. The rifle clattered to the road, and its owner slumped over in a limp heap against the driver.

The buckskin reared, squealing. Flash knew it had stopped the bullet intended for him. For an instant it blocked his vision.

That instant gave the driver time to feed his horses the lash, and gave the fellow in the back seat an opportunity to whirl about and level his .30-30.

As the plunging buckskin leaped from in front of him, Flash flung himself forward and snatched at the head of the nearest of the team of horses. He heard a horrified little scream burst from the lips of Glorieta.

He whirled in time to see the fellow in the back seat rise to his feet and level his gun. Then the driver lashed the plunging horses again, and Flash was jerked from his feet. A streak of pain seared across his left shoulder. He strove to twist around so he could bring his forty-five to bear.

He caught a fleeting glimpse of the rifleman, striving to keep his footing in the lurching surrey until he could fire again. The next instant he was spun round again by the terrorized horses. The driver struck at him with his long whip, but Flash scarcely felt the pain as the lash cut across his face.

Once more he heard the roar of the rifle. He gained his footing for an instant, and saw the smoking weapon pointed straight at his head.

And then Glorieta sprang at her captor. She struck the weapon aside. There was a flash and a roar, but the

bullet struck the sandstone wall, and ricocheted into the air, humming.

During that instant Flash might have plugged the rifleman, had it not been that Glorieta had come between them. Her plucky act probably had saved Flash's life, but it also prevented him from rubbing this foeman out of the picture.

"Jump, Glorieta!" Flash shouted at the top of his voice. "Jump, and I'll 'tend to these—"

With an oath the driver dropped his whip and reached for his holster. Flash could have dropped him at almost the first shot, had it not been for his reluctance to shoot a defenseless man. Instead, he had chosen to shoot it out with the other two. But now that the driver had elected to take part in the battle, Flash felt no reluctance at swapping lead with him. He blazed away. His bullet smashed through the driver's shoulder, and the revolver dropped from his nerveless fingers. The fellow shrieked, flung the lines away, and dived headlong from the surrey.

All this had happened in the twinklink of an eye, while Glorieta was struggling with the rifleman. Flash was still tugging at the bit of the near horse, which was frantic with terror. He knew if the driverless team bolted, the rig might crash over the embankment with results disastrous to the girl.

This was why he had shouted to her to jump. At first he had thought she might have been bound. When he saw she was not, he knew she could leap to the ground without injury to herself. Then, according to his hastily formed plan, he would release the horses and drop the remaining man as the surrey shot past.

But Glorieta either failed to hear him, or she feared to release her grip on the rifleman's weapon. He twisted about, wrenched the rifle free, and flung her violently back into the seat.

This left Flash just the opportunity he had been seeking. As the fellow threw down on him with the rifle, Flash pulled the trigger.

With a gurgling cry the man dropped his rifle and clutched at his breast with both hands. A startled look appeared on his suddenly white face. For an instant he tottered. Then the prancing team jerked forward. He toppled over the rear seat, and somersaulted backward to the roadway.

Flash grabbed the fallen lines, and quickly knotted them about a front wheel so the horses could not bolt. Glorieta, white of face and gasping, started to climb unsteadily to the ground. A glance told Flash she was uninjured. Gun in hand, he darted around the surrey. He feared that the driver, only slightly wounded, might try to snatch up one of the fallen weapons and use it. He knew the other two had pulled their last trigger.

But the gutless driver had his bellyful of fighting with this whirlwind gun-slinger. He had picked himself up and had darted into the bushes. Flash saw him scuttling through the undergrowth at the edge of the dry stream, fifty feet away.

"What's yore hurry, fella?" he called out, and sent a bullet bouncing off the rocks under his nose. The fellow turned, and raised one arm above his head in token of surrender. The other hung limp at his side.

"I quit!" he cried through chattering teeth. "Yuh—yuh wouldn't plug a unarmed, wounded man, would yuh?"

"Anybody that's done what you've done deserves to be plugged," growled Flash. "C'mere—and don't let no weeds grow under yuh!"

As his prisoner scrambled toward him, he flung a query over his shoulder to the girl.

"Are yuh all right, Glorieta?"

"Yes—thanks to you," he heard her say, faintly. "Wh—why did they do this? They wouldn't tell me."

"This polecat will tell us—or wish he had. You better go set down on t'other side of that shoulder of rock, where yuh'll be outa sight of this mess.

I'll be with yuh in a minute, soon as I pry this coyote loose from some information."

He turned to the prisoner: "All right," he barked. "What was the idea in stealin' this lady? Spit it out, if yuh crave to live!"

"We—we weren't goin' to hurt her," the fellow protested in a trembling voice. "Honest, we wasn't. I'll swear it on a stack of mail order catalogues! Chuska Joe was settin' a trap for you. She was to be the bait, that's all."

"All right. Spill the rest of it. Pronto!"

"He knowed he'd lose the election long as you was in town. He wanted to get yuh away from Rosebud long enough to get his voters voted. He knowed yuh'd sorta been shinin' up to this here lady. He figgered if he could snake her away, and make yuh think she'd been kidnaped and was in danger, it would be the easiest way to get rid of you.

"He hired the three of us to turn the trick. We was to grab her in sight of yore buddy, so he'd take the word to you. We—we was to lead you away from Rosebud as far as we could. We picked the Chloride road because of the canyon. We figgered we could hold yuh off indefinite, and stall yuh along till 'twas too late for yuh to get back 'fore the polls was closed. Then we was goin' to turn her loose, and do a little disappearin'. That's all."

Flash looked at him long and steadily. The prisoner's eyes fell before his boring gaze.

"Yo're lyin'," rasped Flash.

CHAPTER XIII

The Jaws of Peril

WITHIN an hour after Flash's departure from Rosebud, most of the town was thoroughly convinced he was yellow.

"He's a four-flusher. He's scared out. When he heard Lightnin' Dan Grady was due from Tres Palmas, he tucked his tail and blowed. It was just luck that he nailed Squint. When it comes to stackin' up against a *real* powder-burner like Lightnin' Dan, he simply ain't got the guts. He's plain, rabbity scared."

This, in substance, was the word that went the rounds like wildfire. Chuska Joe's adherents lost no opportunity to pass it along. They slung the hooks into him, nailed him to the cross, ripped his reputation to tatters.

Supy did his best to stem the tide of villification, and accumulated a black eye for his pains. Branson Colfax clamped down on him, and threatened to have him tossed out on his ear unless he subsided and acted plumb meek. There had been no witnesses of the kidnaping except Supy, and it was plain to be seen that the boss reformer considered his yarn a second-rate lie concocted in an attempt to explain Flash's sudden and suspicious disappearance.

Four o'clock came, and with it word that the train bearing Lightning Dan Grady was late. Chuska Joe's forces were suspiciously peaceable and law-abiding. Colfax was plainly worried, and expressed the fear that the opposition was cooking up some last-minute coup.

Meanwhile, Flash and Glorieta had started back to Rosebud in the surrey with their prisoner. Flash's horse had been wounded so badly it had been necessary to put him out of his misery. The wounded kidnaper's feet had been bound, but it would have submitted him to needless torture to lash his injured arm to the other. Flash tied his good hand to his belt, and Glorieta improvised a sling from his bandanna, which prevented the smashed bones in his shoulder from grating together.

The prisoner was loaded into the back seat. Glorieta, in the front seat beside Flash, was given a revolver, with instructions to keep it trained constantly upon the fellow, and to squeeze the trigger if he so much as batted an eyelash without permission.

"We'll be lucky if we get back to

Rosebud 'fore the polls close," Flash speculated uneasily as he whipped the jaded team into a brisk trot. "I'd give a pretty to know what's happened sinct we been gone."

"You shouldn't have left, Flash," said Glorieta. "Too much depended on your being on the job."

"A daggoned sight more depended on me bein' on *this* job," replied Flash.

A little laugh rippled from the girl's throat, and she tossed the curls out of her eyes.

"Why, we hardly know each other! We met only yesterday!"

"But we're goin' to know each other a heap better, ain't we?"

"I—I hope so. But now—why, I don't even know your real first name. Everyone calls you Flash, but—"

"And yuh don't know my real last name, Miss Glorieta. I never pulled a crooked trick in my life, and I ain't on the dodge from the law. But I have certain reasons for pickin' a new handle. Some day I'll tell yuh—"

"What difference does a name make? I don't choose my friends for their names. I've heard a lot about you. More than you think. I know some splendid things about you."

"Sounds like that crazy pal of mine has been blowin' off his mouth again, Miss Glorieta. He like to brag me up, but yuh mustn't believe everything he tells yuh about me, ma'am. I bet he didn't tell yuh that I'm kinda ornery and unresponsible, besides bein' a tramp, driftin' from one place to another like a tumbleweed."

"But some day you'll settle down, and—"

"I'd like to settle down right here in Rosebud, Miss Glorieta, if—well, if things break the way I hope. But first, I got a couple of matters of business to 'tend to. Got to locate two fellers I been cravin' to meet for a long time."

"I know, Flash. Supy told me. But don't you see how hopeless your quest is? That—that old shooting affair occurred so many years ago. It's probable that both your missing brother and the other man are dead by this time. Both were expert gunmen. And gunmen usually don't live to a ripe old age. Besides, you're just wandering aimlessly. You'd stand just as much chance of meeting them if you—if you settled down in one place."

"But I ain't exactly wanderin' aimless, ma'am. I always head for places where there's trouble, 'cause that's where I'll stand the best chanct of findin' both of 'em. That's why I come to Rosebud. And my hunch maybe wasn't so bad. 'Cause now it looks like I'm nearer meetin' one of 'em than I ever was before."

"Which one, Flash?" the girl asked anxiously. "If it's your brother, I'm glad. If it's the other, it may mean another tragedy. And you may be the one—"

"They's a certain gent I figger is my brother, so yuh needn't worry," said Flash. But as he said it, he knew well enough that if Lightning Dan proved to be his brother, their meeting might prove to be far more tragic than Glorieta imagined.

Glorieta's lips parted in a smile.

"Then if you find him, and bring him the message that he was the victim of a frame-up, you'll be ready to—to settle down?"

Flash's lips closed grimly.

"No'm. Not till I've located t'other, also. Or learned that he's dead. I swore I'd find 'em both, if they're still alive. I aim to do it. That's final."

The girl sighed, and rode in silence. They were following the big bend of the canyon, along the stretch of road Flash had missed when he had taken the cut-off over the ridge. Ahead of them, Flash caught sight of a party of six horsemen, heading in the same direction. A party of belated voters, he decided, trying to reach Rosebud before the polls closed. As they drew nearer, one of the riders spotted them, and the group divided to let them pass. When they were within thirty feet of the horsemen, Flash was startled by a cry from the back seat.

"This is the gunman! Git him, boys!"

Instantly, as he reached for his gun, the true situation dawned upon Flash. He had believed the wounded prisoner had been telling only a part of the truth, and now he knew it.

Chuska Joe was not one to forget easily the humiliating beating administered by Flash. So far as winning the election was concerned, his purpose would have been served well enough by luring Flash away from Rosebud until the polls were closed. But this would not satisfy his own desire for vengeance.

And so he had arranged to lure him away from the town and dry-gulch him. Merely to gang up on him and shoot him down in the streets of Rosebud would have avenged the beating, but it might have caused a flare of indignation which would have cost the boss of Datil County the election.

Chuska Joe had set his trap, and had baited it with Glorieta. Nothing else than the abduction of the girl would have caused Flash to desert his post and leave the town. The kidnapers were to let him catch up with them, and then lure him into the canyon where the ambush awaited him—an ambush from which there would have been no escape.

But in keeping the pursuing Flash beyond mixing distance, the abductors unwittingly had balked their own plans, by forcing their intended victim to take the cut-off over the ridge and thus dodge the ambush in the canyon. The surrey with the captive girl had driven past the spot where lurked the ambushers, but the victim, much to their bewilderment, had failed to show.

After waiting a reasonable time, the ambushers had held a council of war, and had decided to go back down the canyon in search of Flash.

The wounded prisoner had known all this, of course. When he saw Flash had somehow escaped the ambush, he had cooked up a story that sounded reasonably plausible. His only apparent chance of escape was to lead his captor back into the ambush. He doubtless was surprised to find his confederates in the road, out in the open. They, in turn, must have thought the surrey contained their companions, coming back to find out what had gone wrong with Chuska Joe's plans—until the prisoner's shout wised them to the true situation.

All this dawned upon Flash in an instant. During that instant the startled ambushers were reaching for their weapons, and the wounded prisoner had risen to his feet and was striving to throw himself from the surrey. Glorieta, with the gun trained upon him, could have blown his head off, but her natural feminine qualms at the thought of taking human life stayed her hand. This, apparently, was just what the wounded prisoner had been counting on.

"Get down on the floor!" Flash barked at her. "We're goin' to bust our way through 'em!"

As Glorieta obeyed, he lashed at the horses with the whip. They leaped forward like bolts from a catapult. The prisoner was jerked off balance, and toppled back into the rear seat. Three guns barked, and bullets began to whine past Flash's ears.

Had the ambushers used their heads, they would have shot one of Flash's horses. This would have halted the rig, and would have left him at their mercy. He might have gotten two or three of them, but he would have fallen inevitably beneath the guns of the others. But in their excitement at the sudden and startling appearance of their quarry, they had but one thought—to kill him. And so all their weapons were turned upon the driver, rather than the team.

Flash's gun spurted flame. The nearest horseman flung up his arms and toppled from the saddle. A bullet splintered through the back of the front seat, a foot above Glorieta's head. Flash fired again, and a second am-

busher curled up over his saddle horn, clutching at his abdomen, spitting groaning curses through clenched teeth.

Four riders remained—two on the outside of the road, one on the inside, and the fourth some thirty paces dead ahead. Flash bent low as he sent the plunging team straight at the gap ahead. As the surrey shot through it, the three nearest ambushers held their fire an instant, for fear a stray bullet might wing one of their own number as the vehicle ran the gauntlet.

As they smashed through the enemy's front line, Flash whipped his six-gun across his body and fired sidewise, under his left arm. But the rocking of the rig caused his bullet to go wild.

One of the horsemen swung in alongside the wildly galloping team and, leaning from the saddle, snatched at the reins. Flash blazed away at him. His aim was shaken and uncertain. But he saw the hand jerked back and heard a cry of pain.

He had fired four times, and there had been but five shells in the chambers of his six-gun. Glorieta had dropped the captured revolver when she had slid from the seat to the floor. Flash had placed one of the captured Winchesters under the seat, but it was almost useless for close-range fighting, even could he have snatched it out in time.

One rider barred his path. The jolting of the surrey had caused him to miss once. He could not afford to miss this last shot. And so he aimed, not at the man in the saddle, but at the horse, as offering a very much larger target.

Even as his gun barked a leaden slug ripped through the dashboard, grazed his knee, and splintered through the seat. He saw the horse rear, and knew his own bullet had found its mark. The animal twisted, and then collapsed, squarely in the middle of the road.

"Hold tight!" Flash yelled at Glorieta. The next instant the nigh horse of the team leaped the fallen horse and rider. There was a terrific lurch, and for a split second Flash thought the surrey was going to turn over on its side. He threw his weight to one side, and breathed a sigh of thankfulness as he felt the wheels crash to the roadway again.

He lashed the horses again, and glanced back over his shoulder. The last rider, unhurt by his fall, was yanking his .30-30 from the scabbard on the horse's carcass. Flash saw the wounded prisoner struggle to his feet in the back seat in a last attempt to fling himself out.

Behind them, the rifle cracked. The prisoner who had sought to betray them toppled out upon the road, victim of the bullet which had been intended for Flash.

CHAPTER XIV

Lightnin' Dan

ROSEBUD was in a state of turmoil as Flash and Glorieta drove up in front of Reform headquarters, just as the polls closed. The jaded team had almost played out, and they had made the last four miles at a walk. An excited group was gathered on the boardwalk, milling about the tall figure of Branson Colfax, the boss reformer. Colfax spotted Flash the instant he drew up.

"Howdy, Flash," he called out ironically. "Hope you and the lady friend had a pleasant drive."

"Listen here," snapped Flash. "I want yuh to know that what I done was plumb necessary, and—"

"I reckon it *was* plumb necessary," Colfax retorted. "Necessary for you to keep under cover until the danger was past."

"That's a lie, by the clock and yuh know it!" barked Flash, reddening at the laugh which arose from the group.

"It doesn't matter," said Colfax, a little contemptuously. "Election's over. I reckon we win—no thanks to you. 'Twas a lucky break for us that Light-

nin' Dan's train was late, and didn't pull in until just now."

"Where is he?" Flash demanded savagely. "At the station? I'll hunt him up! I'll show you if—"

"Don't trouble. But if you're at the station, you might hop the next train out. Rosebud won't miss you!"

"But, Mr. Colfax!" Glorieta put in eagerly. "You don't understand! Don't you know that Flash risked his life to—"

She was interrupted by the appearance of an excited figure, elbowing its way through the group toward Colfax. It was Supy, one eye gloriously black. At first he failed to see his pal.

"He ain't there, mister!" he blurted out excitedly. "Lightnin' Dan wasn't on the train!"

Branson Colfax heaved a sigh of relief.

"Good! Then we haven't anything more to worry about. The election's won!"

"It may be over, but it ain't won!" Supy protested vehemently. "Not by a helluva sight! Chuska Joe's imported gunman ain't on that train. But he *was* on it! Passengers say he hopped off at that loadin' pen, midway between Buckskin and here. And there was a gang of eight or ten fellers a-hossback there to meet him. I don't know what's behind it all—but I can guess that somehow, Chuska Joe's still fixin' to slip us the dirty end of the stick!"

Colfax stood in silence a moment, brows furrowed in thought.

"I got it!" he cried suddenly. "Why didn't I think of it before? I knew Chuska Joe's gang was too meek and peaceable. I knew they must be framing something, but I couldn't guess what—until now! They're after the ballot box from the Buckskin precinct—our precinct! It's on its way here now. If they can get away with it, we're sunk! Plumb to the bottom of the bog!"

"Why let 'em get away with it?" spoke up Flash. "The officials can't more'n just left Buckskin a few minutes ago to bring the ballot box to the county seat. If we hit the trail right now, we got time to stop 'em."

"*We?*" snapped the boss reformer. "Who invited *you* to horn in our party? You better go take another buggy ride with the lady friend!"

Flash flushed crimson, but kept a grip on his temper.

"Listen, mister," he barked. "Yuh forget yo're goin' up against Lightnin' Dan Grady, the slickest lead-sprayer in the country—barrin' one! He could ease a dozen of yuh off 'fore yuh had a chanct to grab out yore guns! Are yuh goin' to turn down the services of the only man hereabouts that can shade him on the draw? Are yuh goin' to take the responsibility of havin' a bunch of these boys turned into corpses, just 'cause yo're too bull-headed to—"

Perhaps Flash's eagerness to tangle with the imported gunman convinced Colfax he had gotten off on the wrong foot in his most recent estimation of him. Perhaps he merely reasoned that by taking Flash along, he had nothing to lose and possibly everything to gain. At any rate, he cut him off with a barked:

"All right. C'mon. You'll get a chance to show your stuff. Hit the leather, and trail along of us! . . . Boys, grab your hosses, and let's get going!"

But every saddle horse at the tie-rail and inside the Rosebud livery was claimed by its owner, and for a moment it appeared Flash would have to waste precious minutes locating a mount elsewhere. Supy solved the problem.

"Here, Flash—take my pinto!" he said eagerly. "I'll foller along, somehow. Pal, yo're goin' up against the fastest man in the country. It'll be the biggest showdown of yore whole life. Here—take this rabbit's foot. It'll pull yuh through, if anything can!"

Supy, in parting with the charm he believed brought him good fortune and

protected him from harm, was making the biggest sacrifice he knew how to make. As Flash, with a grinning word of thanks, swung into the pinto's saddle and joined Colfax and his supporters, tearing out amid clouds of dust and the pounding of galloping hoofs, Supy turned and cast about him for another horse.

In front of the election headquarters were two teams—the jaded team Flash had just brought in, and a pair of roans hitched to a buckboard which had been used to convey voters to the polls, and which bore a huge Reform banner. Just hopping into the latter was Glorieta.

"I'm sorry, lady," said Supy, running up to the buckboard. "I'll have to ast yuh to get out. I need this rig to go with the boys."

"Jump in," ordered Glorieta breathlessly. "Let's get started!"

"But you—*you* can't go, lady!" cried the horrified Supy. "They's due to be a heap of gunplay, and you—"

"Good-by, then," she returned quickly. "I'm going alone! You're welcome to go along, but if you think you're going to put me out, why—"

With a groan which expressed his impatience with the contrariness of women folk, Supy hopped into the buckboard and snatched up the lines. In a moment they were hitting the high places in the wake of the party of Reform riders.

The road to Buckskin followed, in the opposite direction, the same dry stream bed as did the foothills road where Flash had escaped the ambushers. But, out on the plains now, it wound between low clay bluffs. Colfax and his riders, rounding a bend in the bluff, came with startling abruptness upon Chuska Joe and his crew a minute after they had held up the election officials from Buckskin. The four election officials were lined up, their hands in the air, alongside the wagon in which they had been conveying the ballot box to the county seat. The box had been tumbled out on the ground.

"What's the big idea, boys?" called out Colfax in a voice whose ease belied the tenseness of the situation.

"Oh, howdy, Colfax," Chuska Joe greeted him. "We heard, see, that there'd been a heap of fraud committed in the Buckskin precinct. We aim to look over the ballots, and heave out all the crooked ones."

"If you do," snapped Colfax, "your side won't have a vote left in the box!"

"Yeah?" sneered the dive owner. "Well, we brung a expert along, see, to look 'em over. I reckon none of you Reform cookies will dispute his judgment. This is him—Lightnin' Dan Grady, of Tres Palmas!"

Flash's eyes turned instantly to the man Chuska Joe indicated—the man he feared might prove to be his own lost brother. From the recesses of his memory he strove to recall every last detail of his brother, Jack, as he had last seen him so many years ago—strove to fit the picture to the swaggering figure which stood alongside the ballot box. They were all dismounted, now.

Memory pictured a curly-headed, laughing youngster of nineteen. Before him stood a curly-headed, bull-like man, some years Flash's senior—a man who laughed, but gratingly, from between twisted, snarling lips. Flash could not make up his mind—knew he could not be sure until he saw this gunman in action and learned whether he used Jack's old trick style of shooting. And if he did—well, Flash knew well enough that he'd take a slug between the eyes sooner than pull a trigger on his own brother!

"Good!" he heard Colfax saying to Chuska Joe. "We brought a expert along, ourselves. From what I hear of how you come by that mashed face, I reckon as how you must know Flash Greet!"

Flash saw Lightnin' Dan's narrowed eyes turn upon him, and heard the gunman say:

"So this is the four-flushin' kid gunslinger I been hearin' so much about!

Better say yore good night prayer, kid, 'cause in a minute yo're goin' to take a long, long sleep! When I get through with yuh—"

Behind him Flash heard the clatter of hoofs. Involuntarily he glanced over his shoulder.

And then Lightnin' Dan dived for his gun. Things happened fast.

There was a flash and a roar. A blue hole appeared between Lightnin' Dan's eyes.

From the corner of his eye, Flash had seen a movement so lightning-swift that it almost defied the eye to follow it. It was Branson Colfax, the boss reformer, the man who never packed a gun—Branson Colfax, snatching a forty-five from the holster of the man nearest him—Branson Colfax, with incredible speed and accuracy, sending a bullet smashing through the brain of Lightning Dan, who treacherously had sought to shoot Flash down while his head was turned!

Something else Flash saw—something so astounding that it left him gasping. But he had no time for questions, for in the same instant he saw Chuska Joe whip out a gun and, from one side where he could not be seen, level it at Colfax—at the man who had just saved Flash's life.

Flash leaped in front of the boss reformer. Chuska Joe's gun was out and leveled before the leaping Flash even reached for his holster. But both guns cracked at the same instant. Both bullets went home. Flash's slug plowed through the dive owner's heart. Chuska Joe's, which had been intended for Colfax, smashed through Flash's shoulder and sent him spinning—spinning into the arms of the boss reformer.

When he recovered consciousness, his head was pillowed on Glorieta's lap. Colfax, kneeling by his side, was bandaging Flash's wound with strips from his own shirt. About them were grouped the staring members of Colfax's followers. Chuska Joe's gang, with both their leader and their gunman dead, with their ballot-stealing plot frustrated and the election lost, had slunk away.

"You can't fool me," Flash said weakly, grinning faintly at Colfax. "They's only one man in the world that can shoot as fast as you shot Lightnin' Dan. They's only one man uses yore trick style of shootin', with his thumb 'longside the barrel!"

"You're wrong," smiled Colfax; "there's two. Me, and the kid brother I taught to shoot so many years ago!"

"Jack, yuh old son-of-a-gun," retorted Flash happily, "ever sinct I been growed up I been lookin' for yuh, to tell yuh that old shootin' scrape was all a frame-up—that a feller name of Frisky Dick did the killin', and laid it onto you!"

"I sorta suspicioned I'd been framed, Flash. But I didn't dare go back to find out. Reckon maybe I'm lucky things broke as they did. If they hadn't, I might have gone on as a gunslinger until I got mine. Way it was, I learned a lesson. I changed my name, and swore I'd never touch another gun as long as I lived. And I never did—until just now, when I seen Frisky Dick was going to pull a sidewinder on you."

Flash started. "Frisky Dick? Ain't yuh sorta mixed up?"

His brother shook his head and smiled. "It's been all of fifteen years since I saw him last, but he's one man I could never forget. The minute I saw him, I knew Lightnin' Dan Grady was Frisky. Who'd you think he was?"

"S-somebody else," Flash stammered.

"*Now* will yuh say that rabbit's foot didn't bring yuh luck?" Supy asked.

"If a bullet hole through the shoulder is luck, I reckon it did," laughed Flash. He looked up at the girl.

"Well, Glorieta, I found both the gents I was lookin' for. Reckon it's time I quit driftin', and settled down. They's just one thing I'd like to find out, 'fore I decide definite."

"Yes?" she murmured, smiling sweetly as she tossed the chestnut curls out of her eyes. "What is it?"

TRIPLE CROSSED

By Jacland Marmur

His gunfighting creed was his religion. He sinned only once—when he dodged a six-gun slug.

SAM YANCEY carried his Colt .44 in a shoulder holster under his left armpit. He lived by the gun—in a very odd way. And he said very often, drily, with his lips twisted in a wry smile as he tugged good humoredly at his peaked brown beard, that he expected he'd die by the gun. He wasn't a gambler, this lean muscular man with the cold blue eyes, though he wore the long Prince Albert coat over a loud checkered vest and the sugar-loaf hat of the gold towns, with a low flat crown and a wide brim. Sam Yancey loved a fight, they said in Snake Bar, better than he liked to eat. And though he never started one, he was always in at the finish somehow, blue eyes snapping like polished steel gimlet points as he stood up to the blaze of flame and smoke belching guns.

Sam Yancey never tried to dodge a slug. Slugs came too damned quick, he said, for that sort of thing and dodging disturbed a man's aim and his speed on the trigger. It was better to stand up to the muzzle of a roaring gun like a man ought to and say your say with lead. Well, that sort of philosophy was all very well for a man with nine charmed lives, but "Hawk-eye" Sam Yancey carried something near a half pound of lead about his muscle-ridged person to attest to the fact that he believed what he said.

Not long after his first arrival in Snake Bar, Yancey was standing at the bar of the Last Chance, looking ruefully down at the amber colored liquid in the glass before him. Off in a shadowy corner of the wild, bonanza gold town's honkytonk, the faro dealer was arranging the tools of his trade on the table before him in preparation of the evening's business, trying hard all the while to appear unconcerned at the bellowing of Pete Legue, the killer of the hills, who stood in the center of the saloon's empty central space.

Legue was bareheaded, and shaggy black hair fell over his ears and narrow forehead to lend an added look of ferocity to his already bloated, half-drunken face. He wore the leathern jacket of the prospector, pushed aside by his hairy paws as he swept his gun out of its hip holster and flipped it

with an expert smack! into the palm of his left hand. In his beady, bloodshot eyes there glared the blood lust of the killer, and what few patrons there were in the saloon at that early hour of evening had pressed themselves quickly out of the direct range of the killer's vision. Yancey alone stood with his back to the bloodthirsty vulture of the gold hills and continued to stare ruefully down at his whiskey glass.

Legue bellowed on in a savage bass growl. "There ain't a man in the place," he roared, "got guts enough to draw with me! You're a lot of yellow livered snivelin' skunks! All of you!"

Black Joe, the barkeep, stirred closer to the bar, scowling angrily in his impotence. Behind Yancey's back the killer raved on, infuriated that no one dared accept his challenge. The man craved action!

His gun swayed in a narrow arc. The muzzle belched a yellow streak of flame as he sent a slug tearing into the row of bottles and glassware behind the bar. The lead ball whizzed by Sam Yancey's ear with a stinging whistle, so close had it passed. He never stirred an inch. He only lifted his drink calmly from the bar and tossed off the liquor, slowly replacing the emptied glass to the bartop as if he hadn't heard the crash of the broken bottle before him or the infuriated bellowing of the half crazed killer behind his back. Sam Yancey said he didn't dodge slugs. And he meant it!

"You there at the bar!" Legue shouted hoarsely at that maddening back. "Are you deaf an' dumb or just plain— By God! You're as yellow as the hull pack!"

Hawkeye Sam Yancey turned about very slowly then, leaning the small of his back against the bar. The expression on his face never changed a particle. Only the bright twinkling blue eyes beneath the wide brim of his sugar-loaf hat hardened into a glittering frozen sheen as he faced the killer of the gold hills.

"That's a lie," he said very slowly and very quietly.

Legue hesitated, mouth open, smoking gun in hand. Then his jaws snapped suddenly shut and the lips twisted into a triumphant leer. Prey at last! The beady eyes snapped with the lust of the killer. He took a short pace forward, then stopped short. The few faces that lined the walls blanched to a pasty white.

"Are you armed?" the killer barked.

"I am," Yancey replied with that ominous softness of tone men learned to fear like the loud sound of the rattler.

"Where do you carry your gun?" Legue grinned a mouth splitting grin as he asked the insolent question.

Yancey flipped aside the front of his Prince Albert coat and revealed the end of his shoulder holster just protruding from under his left armpit. "I find it handy enough under the arm," he remarked drily.

Legue's grin grew broader and more vicious. "That's a lousy place to carry a gun for a quick draw," he gritted between tobacco discolored teeth.

"That, too, is a lie," Yancey said again, very slowly and very softly.

Legue's face paled a shade, but the bloodshot eyes snapped fire beneath the shaggy mop of overhanging hair. Instantly he rammed his still smoking gun back into its holster and braced his legs wide apart before the frozen stare of Hawkeye Yancey.

"Will you draw, sir?" he demanded in a hoarse throaty snarl.

"I will," Sam snapped.

And he did.

His body never moved an inch as the killer's gun tore clear of leather and sent a leaping tongue of flame in his direction from the hip. The lead slug tore into Hawkeye's chest an inch or two below the shoulder. But the killer's second ball went wild and ripped jagged splinters out of the pine bar at Yancey's side; because the fraction of a heart beat before even that first shot was fired from the flame

belching muzzle of the killer's gun, Sam's right hand had torn his Colt from its holster. So perfectly timed was the movement of arm, wrist and hand that there wasn't an eye in the place saw anything but the lightning-like, miraculous appearance of that gun. And although the two barking notes tore into the tense stillness of the saloon as if at the same time, Yancey's gun had spat smoke and lead the fraction of an instant before the killer's.

Only once had Sam Yancey fired and the lead ball pierced the heart of Pete Legue!

He dropped limply. A smoking gun fell to the sawdust covered floor from his nerveless hand with a loud clatter. On his knees, his eyes already glazed with death, his body hesitated, then pitched forward full length, one leg doubling up grotesquely under his massive body. Sam Yancey looked down at him in utter silence, for a moment, through the rising drift of acrid burned powder smoke; then, he shot his gun back into its holster and turned quietly toward the bar again.

"Will you dress this wound up a bit, Joe?" he asked, softly, of the barkeep. "Till I can manage to get it to Doc Hartley's?"

AND that was the main reason why from that night Hawkeye Sam Yancey kept the lookout's seat over the gaming tables of the Last Chance Saloon in the hectic, gold-crazed mining town of Snake Bar at fifty dollars a night.

He sat in a high chair with a wooden plank nailed to the bottom run to serve as a footrest for his heavy riding boots, and his vision to the wide front doors was unobstructed. Black Joe's games were square, from the roulette table clear down the line to the Chinks' fan-tan game. Every sourdough and grizzled veteran of the luring gold trails knew that. If they had thought differently, Black Joe would never have survived the stern justice of that frontier town. Hawkeye Sam Yancey's job was of a different order. The heaped up gold coin before the bankers and the stream of glittering yellow dust that each night passed across those rude pine tables offered a tantalizing lure to outlaws of the hills, and against such marauding bands the only effective protection was the steady hand of a swift dealer of lead slugs.

So, like a tyrant king on a dilapidated, rough pine high chair, Hawkeye Sam Yancey sat enthroned each night until early morning, his cold blue eyes snapping swiftly toward the wide doors with each new entrant.

Then the Deering brothers rode into town, with a third unknown rider recruited for their daring exploit. The night was warm and the swing doors of the Last Chance stood wide open, throwing a square patch of yellow light out on the dirt street of Snake Bar. Inside the saloon, the night's revelry was running at fever heat. The jostling dancing couples well nigh drowned the low whine of the scraping fiddles. The three owners of the Tin Cup Diggings, that famed claim on the Yuba River, were in town; hungry for a celebration, pouring yellow dust across the far table. Behind the bar Black Joe darted back and forth serving the grizzled miners and the ballet-skirted dancing girls. Only Hawkeye Sam Yancey sat on his throne with a frozen, blue-eyed stare glued on each man who stumped through the open doors and edged his way through the crowds toward the bar.

In the loud noise of clinking glass, the laughter of the women and the loud growling of the rough men, Yancey couldn't hear the swift approach of the mounted men. Just on the edge of that patch of yellow light thrown from the glaring lit interior of the Last Chance, a rider reared his mount to a standstill. There, without dismounting, he sat the beast, and from where Sam Yancey sat he could make out only the vague outline of horse and

rider. Instinctively he strained his eyes to recognize the man, but he saw only the indistinct blur of a face beneath a broad brimmed hat. Then he saw the man lift his arm in a sweeping gesture to his invisible companions. The next instant Yancey knew that it had been a prearranged signal.

Above the loud noise of hilarity in the saloon he heard the clatter of galloping hoofs scattering dirt and loose pebbles. Two beasts flashed like streaked lightning into the lit space before the Last Chance and the next moment the rangy mountain ponies rode straight through the open doors and, rearing high on their haunches, came to a snorting, frightened standstill just within the doors of the honkytonk!

The two bandits were masked, guns drawn and ready in hand, knees pressed close to saddle leather to guide their plunging animals. Of all the crowd in the place, Sam Yancey was a marked man. He knew it! The glittering blue eyes narrowed to thin slits of fire. Instantly the loud noise of revelry died to an ominous hush. The crowd backed swiftly from the dance floor against the far walls. One of the beasts snorted in fright and the deep bass growl of its rider snapped into the tense stillness.

"Reach fer the ceiling! The fust man thet stirs a gun hand gits drilled! *Pronto!* You! Behind the bar there! Up!"

Black Joe darted back from the bar before he could reach his gun. Sam Yancey leaped to his feet. The second outlaw swung his weapon in a short arc and let fly instantly at the lookout. Yancey, feet braced wide, the blaze of battle in his eye, never stirred. He didn't believe in dodging slugs! Instead, full in the range of those two mounted men, he stood up to their blazing guns and his hand snapped like lightning for his left armpit. That deadly Colt came out of its holster spitting flame and smoke straight in the eyes of the beasts. The mounts plunged snorting at the loud reports and the stinging smoke in their nostrils. That first shot of Yancey's, intended to frighten the animals rather than hit the riders, saved the lookout's life. No man can shoot straight from the saddle of a plunging, rearing beast!

There Yancey stood, not six paces away from the enraged beasts, exchanging flame and lead with those two blazing guns! A slug creased his skull and the blood trickled down his left cheek. But the stabbing jets of flame from his gun never stopped. One beast toppled over with a ball through its brain, rolling over on its rider, already rigid in death. The second outlaw swayed in the saddle, fired wildly once again; then he, too, pitched like a sack of meal from the beast's back. The animal lunged about and tore madly out through the open doors.

Sam Yancey stood swaying where he was, the smoking gun in his hand silenced at last, the blood dripping steadily from his left temple. The fallen beast before him kicked once and gasped its last. The acrid, burned powder smoke of battle lifted slowly from the gruesome scene and hung in clouds about the overhead oil lamps. Only then did Yancey step forward, swaying slightly from his wound, toward the open doors.

He stepped out into the night to the porch of the honkytonk, the light from the interior falling full on his tall gaunt figure. The third bandit, who had no doubt acted as a lookout, was no where in sight. Calmly Yancey holstered his weapon and turned again toward the interior of the Last Chance Saloon.

At that moment a tongue of flame stabbed the darkness from across the dirt street of Snake Bar. Yancey lurched forward another step, tried to turn to face his cowardly attacker; then he pitched face forward to the floor, his outstretched hands falling just inside the entrance of the saloon.

Behind his back a black shadow leaped to the saddle of a waiting pony and plunged madly off into the darkness of the night. . . .

ANYTHING Sam Yancey might have forgiven; anything but that last cowardly shot out of the darkness at his back. The searing memory of that dastardly act lived with him through the horrible days and nights of fever. The ball had gone clean through his chest, tearing a hole through his upper lung. Doc Hartley told the truth when he said flatly that any ordinary man would have died within an hour.

But Hawkeye Sam Yancey didn't die.

He coughed blood for a week: his lean face grew paler and the blue eyes bored out of the hollowed cheeks with a cold bitter sheen. But the crying need he had for vengeance wouldn't let him die. Ten days after the attempted hold-up he was sitting propped up in bed asking Black Joe if any trace had been found of the third outlaw. Black Joe shook his great, black-bearded head sadly. The two men Yancey had drilled were quickly recognized as the famous Deering brothers. The third bandit, acting as lookout for them, was undoubtedly a local man whom the two leader bandits had recruited for his knowledge of the lay of the land. But he hadn't been seen or recognized and the men who rode after him soon lost his trail in the dark night. He might be any one of a dozen hangers-on about town.

Yancey said nothing, but in spite of logic, in spite of Doc Hartley's mournful prognostications, he continued to get well steadily. Two weeks later he was on his feet before the bar of the Last Chance.

But something had happened to the lookout of Black Joe's gaming tables!

Outwardly he seemed much the same. But he was thinner, more gaunt, and it seemed as if his dread illness had added inches to his stature. His cheeks were hollowed and the jaws, clamped tightly closed, showed the grim lines of muscle ridges on his face. His cold blue eyes were sunk deeper in the pale face. They were frozen and bitter now, always searching, carrying a deadly purpose masked behind that brittle stare.

Some of the old veterans said it was likely Sam Yancey's nerve had been shattered by his grim experience. But Black Joe, when he heard this, mumbled incoherently in his beard or said nothing. Because he knew better: Hawkeye Sam Yancey was on the gun trail!

"Now, Sam," Joe said earnestly to his lookout, "there ain't no need for you to be in such a damned hurry! Your job'll be waitin' for you."

Yancey looked up at him, nodded understandingly, but said nothing. Then he walked away and took his seat at a far corner table. Here he sat night after night while the strength returned slowly to his gaunt, muscular body. But the merry twinkle never came back to those keen blue eyes that roved always about now in a cold piercing search. . . .

Pedro Gomez found him there one night at his customary table and slouched down carelessly into the opposite chair. Gomez was a short heavy-set half-breed with a florid face, piggish eyes, and a pair of downward drooping, jet black mustaches. He sat there in silence for a full minute, paring his dirty finger nails with the razor-edged blade of a hunting knife. Then suddenly he sheathed the wicked looking steel blade, tapped the butt of his protruding gun with the palm of his right paw, and leaned forward idly.

"My name Gomez," he muttered softly, "Pedro Gomez."

He leaned back in his chair after imparting this piece of information, tapping the floor with the heel of his riding boot, and waited, his broad grin displaying uneven white teeth. Yancey turned his head slowly and drew a deep draught of his cigarette.

"My name Gomez," the breed repeated quietly. "Pedro Gomez. I know mooch. Sam Yancey geev mooch," he added, insinuatingly, "to know a—a certain man?"

Yancey stared at him in silence, a puzzled question in his bitter gaze. Then he nodded calmly, but underneath the table the lean fingers of his right hand clenched tightly. The breed shrugged his shoulder, sure of the interest of his man, and without referring again to his enigmatic first question, started off on an altogether different tack.

"A man who shoot so straight—" The pig's eyes glittered meaningly and the thin lips were curled in an ingratiating smile. "A man who shoot so straight ees—ees foolish to work for so leetle money."

Yancey leaned far back in his chair, the keen eyes calmly surveying the florid face across the table. His eyes narrowed alarmingly. Then suddenly he smiled—a smile that came only from the lips and not from the eyes.

"You mean I ought to turn outlaw, Gomez?" he asked, grinning.

"Me?" The breed brought both hands up in alarm. His bass growl carried outraged denial, but the crafty leer was still on his lips. "I would not theenk of such a thing, Yancey!"

"Well, I'll ask Black Joe for a raise when I go back to work," Sam muttered drily. "Thanks for the tip." He made as though to turn his back.

The breed leaned forward eagerly and in an instant the ingratiating smile had vanished from his face and an ugly scowl came into the shifting nervous eyes.

"You are not so foolish as you want Pedro Gomez to theenk!" he gritted hoarsely. "You weel geev mooch to know a—a man who shoots een thee back—"

Yancey whirled about, his clenched hands grasping the edge of the table till the knuckles showed white. Above the table his body leaned forward, a blazing anger leaping suddenly to life in those deep-sunken piercingly bitter eyes.

"You know who—" he snapped between gritted teeth.

Gomez relaxed as suddenly as he had tensed. He tipped back his chair carelessly, grinning craftily as he idly reached for a sack of makings and took to rolling a fat black cigarette.

"I?" he leered. "Perhaps I know something: perhaps I know nothing. But—"

"Spit it out!" Yancey barked. "What's eatin' you!"

"We-ell," the breed drawled softly as he pushed his whiskey glass from before him and licked his homemade cigarette with the tip of his tongue, "eet ees joost one crazy idee from Pedro Gomez's brain that a man who has been shot so een thee back like you —we-ell, eet ees possible he no longer shoot so straight when—eef some one come try hold up thee games again. No one could accuse anything for that," spreading out the palms of his dirty paws before him on the table. "Eet ees so, no?"

"Well, you dirty—"

"Now, Yancey!" the breed soothed quickly, an ugly snap coming into his small eyes. "I am joost supposin'! I have said nothing—nothing incriminatin'."

Yancey controlled himself with great effort, nodded his head, and heard the crafty breed through, an inkling of Pedro's treacherous plan flashing through his mind.

"So then," Pedro went on more rapidly now, "Eef Hawkeye Sam Yancey, he no shoot so straight, some men might make one clean getaway weeth plenty gold. No? Then, when eet ees almost over, eef Yancey ees signalled by, we-ell, by a man call Pedro, joost suppose, which masked hombre eet ees shoot Yancey een thee back three week ago, he can keel heem, hey? No? No one een thee saloon can say Yancey, he have no tried to stop thee hold up when he has keel at least one bandit. Eet ees joost that hees nerve ees gone

from bad experience. An' that make one man less for thees Pedro to divide thee loot weeth. An' by'n'by Yancey maybe get good cut too, beside he have keel for his revenge!" He hesitated for the fraction of an instant and then finished hurriedly. "Thees ees joost one dream from the head of Pedro Gomez, that ees all. You understan', Yancey?"

He was silent at last, leaning far back in his chair, his beady eyes glued in half-fright and expectation on the lookout's face, his fangs bared in a mouth-splitting grin. Yancey nodded dazedly, his mind in a whirl, the muscles of his face working frantically in his desperate effort at control. In utter silence they glared at each other for a full minute, each man intent on sizing up the craft and the wile of the other, like two wild jungle beasts the moment before a struggle to the death. The breed it was who broke the tenseness of that terrible silence.

"You go back—to work—soon?"

"To-night," Yancey whispered.

"I weel see what eet ees can be done," Pedro muttered under his breath.

Then he rose, hitched once at his holster belt, and strode rapidly out through the swing doors.

THAT same night Sam Yancey climbed again into the lookout's seat facing the front doors of the Last Chance Saloon. Behind the bar, Black Joe's bearded face was creased in deep-wrinkled smiles of good humor. By his courage and daring, the intrepid lookout had won his way surely into the tough hearts of the mining town. They were a motley crowd of hard, bitter men, bitten by hardship and toil and the grim struggle after the luring yellow metal, yet each of them as they entered and saw Sam Yancey again in his accustomed place after that gruesome experience, called out a gruff word of welcome and tribute and drank his health. Even Pedro Gomez lifted a glass in honor of the lookout's return, but there was a subtle smile of triumph in his florid face and the pigs' eyes seemed to wink knowingly.

And all the while a churning turmoil of thought raged in Yancey's brain behind the cool appraising glitter in those clear blue eyes.

For the privilege of a meeting with the unknown cowardly rider who had drilled him in the back out of the blackness, he was willing to stake his life! Sam Yancey who lived by the gun and was ready to die by the gun admired any man, outlaw or law-abiding citizen, who had the courage and the manhood to stand up to the blaze of a flaming six-gun and fight out his battles squarely. But to his dying day he couldn't ever forgive the dastardly act of a back-shooting slayer. Every man in Snake Bar knew that. Pedro Gomez knew it too! And for the sake of learning who the cowardly attacker had been, Sam Yancey was placing his head straight into the unknown outlaw's noose! Because if he didn't, barring a miracle, it was likely he would never know who had fired that shot in the night. Now he knew for a certainty that that man would be one of the band who at some night in the near future would stage their hold-up for the sake of a fortune in gold and dust.

If it had been as simple a thing as that—a gun battle against odds of three or four to one—Sam Yancey wouldn't have given it another thought. He could shoot as straight against four as against one. But if he held his fire when the attempted job was pulled off, his honor, too, was at stake! And as that first night of whirling thought progressed, Sam knew in his mind that, before ever the fight started, the deck was stacked certainly against him. He knew he'd be double-crossed. Pedro was that sort! Securing partial safety in the near alliance with the dangerous lookout, Yancey knew the outlaws would pick him off the first one, hesitating not even at cold-blooded murder when they started their night's work, placing their hope in the fact

that he would hold his fire until he had learned the identity of the man he wanted! And those few moments of hesitation on Yancey's part would spell his death!

Here, indeed, were terrible odds! Yancey ground his teeth together in a cold silent rage as he sat so calmly in his seat. At any rate, he reflected—that grim smile flitting vaguely across his thin face—he knew what he was up against. Double crossed at the outset before the fight even started! Well, let 'em come! He'd show them something new—a triple cross with a blaze of death at the finish!

His gaze roved to where Black Joe stood behind the bar, leaning with elbows propped carelessly on the pine top. Joe's kindly understanding eyes were fixed on the lookout, and he seemed to nod a silent approval.

Hawkeye Sam Yancey was on the gun trail in dead earnest!

A week passed uneventfully, a week of tense wracking expectation that might well have shattered the nerves of a less determined man than the lookout of the Last Chance Saloon who knew now so certainly that he lived with his head in the jaws of a murderous trap. Saturday, pay night in the mines of the Buttes and the high Sierras, sent its stream of grizzled men down the brown sides of the hills at dusk toward the hectic mining town of Snake Bar, each man eager for the lights, the raw liquor, the hilarity and lure of the honkytonk's gambling tables.

The place filled quickly. And this night, if ever, Sam Yancey knew might bring the deadly feud to a head. Pedro Gomez wandered stealthily about the place, weaving his way silently through the tables where the Goddess of Chance ruled supreme. Late at night when the revelry and the boisterous guffawing of the men and the laughter of the dancing girls was at its highest, the breed walked past the high chair on which sat perched the cold-eyed lookout. He waved a greeting at Yancey so that all might see, a crafty leer twisting the thin lips into an ugly grin.

"'Lo, Sam," he called quietly. "Beeg night, hey?"

Hawkeye Sam Yancey nodded without comment, but from under the broad brim of his sugar-loaf hat the thinly slitted eyes watched the breed as he edged his way unobtrusively through the milling crowd on the dance floor toward the doors of the saloon. Here Pedro hesitated for a moment, turning about to view with his shifty, nervous eyes the glaringly lit scene of ribald revelry. He flashed a knowing glance at the lookout and then walked out of the patch of light in the doorway into the darkness of Snake Bar's single dirt street.

Yancey never stirred in his seat, but under the calm exterior every muscle in his tall body was tense as set steel springs. The blue eyes snapped swiftly about the place and darted a keen look toward Black Joe, who too had seen the overt departure of the breed.

Ten minutes later all hell broke loose in Black Joe's Snake Bar Last Chance saloon and honkytonk!

Yancey, boots braced on the foot rest of his chair for swift action, expected to see two or at most three outlaws in Pedro's gang. He knew the breed's cupidity and he knew Gomez would not want to divide booty with half a dozen partners. On this belief Sam had staked his play. One of the two or three men he expected to see he knew would be the man he was after—and odds of three to one didn't bother him, not with a Colt .44 strapped under his arm-pit!

True it was that only two men burst through the doors with guns drawn and in spite of the black face coverings, the lookout, who had memorized every detail of the breed's dress, recognized Gomez instantly as the leading bandit with the ends of a drooping mustache showing below the mask. But at the moment of their entrance the full meaning and intent of Pedro's

treachery became apparent in a revealing flash to Yancey. For as they burst through the doors, four other men who had taken up their stations unobtrusively close to the saloon's entrance detached themselves instantly from the crowd, whipping guns out of holsters to join their partners.

All this swept through Yancey's brain with the speed of lightning. Gone now was his carefully thought out plan of fighting it out at the point of lead-belching guns with two or three men to make certain he got his man. Pedro had thoroughly outwitted him! Six men all told! True enough that the breed would most likely double cross them as easily as he had done Sam, leaving them to hold the crowd and the sure guilt while he raced with perhaps one greaser partner for the Border with the loot.

But the thing Sam Yancey wanted to know was *which one of these six men* was the back-shooting murderer he was after? How damnably well Pedro had him in his net!

Once inside the doors the outlaws, reinforced by the men planted inside the honkytonk, spread out and advanced fanwise with leveled six-guns. Gomez let fly instantly in Yancey's direction. Sure of himself the breed was —as sure as hell! Pedro alone possessed the knowledge that the lookout wanted so desperately. By his clever ruse he knew Yancey would be forced to hold his fire until he finished him. And he meant to take no chances with that lightning-like draw and hawk's eye. The bellowing crowd that swarmed like a stampeding herd of steers from the dance floor alone disturbed the breed's aim and saved Sam's life. The slug whistled past his ear.

"Back—everee one!" Yancey heard the breed's voice bark the command and the threat. "Thee first man moves ees dead!"

At the faro table the dealer's hand snapped for the draw. One of the other outlaws drilled him instantly and he pitched forward on his face with a loud groan heard above the frightened shriek of a dancing girl. Only an instant Yancey hesitated. Then he leaped up and sideways, catapulting himself through the air and landing on his feet on a poker table, his heels grinding to bits a scattered heap of chips. But his gun hand had never stirred for his armpit! Behind the bar Black Joe, covered and helpless, stared in dumbfounded amazement at his lookout's action. For the first time in his life and in the memory of men in Snake Bar, Sam Yancey was dodging slugs!

"Draw!" the barkeep shrieked, arms above his head. "Draw, y'fool!"

"Yaller!" some one in the crowd bellowed. "Yancey's gone yaller as hell!"

Still he held his fire! Hawkeye Sam Yancey had gone yellow before the gaping deadly muzzles of smoking shooting irons! So thought every man in the place. The thin cruel lips of the breed, half hidden in the black mustache—all that was visible of his face below the concealing mask—twisted in a leer of triumph. Only the fraction of a moment had passed since the outlaws had first burst through the doors. They had by now advanced well into the saloon's interior, driving the crowd before them against the far walls as they made a concerted, well planned drive for the heaped up gaming tables. Again Pedro's gun twisted in a swift arc toward Yancey's towering form. Still the lookout's gun remained silent. Instead, he leaped again, just before the breed fired, this time landing on the pine bartop. Sam Yancey, Hawkeye Sam Yancey who had never know fear was running full tilt! Another leap and he landed behind the bar, crouching below the top for protection.

"Y'yaller livered rat!" Black Joe barked at him. "S'hep me Gawd, I never thought—"

But something in that bitter, frozen look in Yancey's eyes stopped the enraged and helpless barkeep. Below the level of the bartop the lookout crawled

toward the forward end of the bar nearest the doors of the Last Chance. Meanwhile the band of outlaws held the crowd at bay with levelled guns, Gomez advancing ahead of the rest toward the tables.

"Keep these rats covered!" the breed snarled to his companions, secure in his triumph. "Eef thee lookout show hees head above the bar, spatter hees brain!"

But Hawkeye Sam Yancey, crouching for an instant below the level of the pine wood, hadn't started fighting yet! He braced himself momentarily, heels digging at the floor for a firm foothold. Then like a flash he lifted himself from the ground, hurling his whole tall gaunt body clear over the top of the bar in a single bound. A lead slug, meant for his brain, plastered itself into the long mirror behind the bar, shattering glass and bottles to the ground.

"Bustin' mirrors is damned bad luck, Gomez!"

The lookout's voice was a mad bellow of rage now. The lust of battle blazed in those glittering blue eyes as he sprang toward the doors. There he ripped an overturned table toward the saloon's exit, blockading the door as best he could. Behind it he dropped to one knee, his sugar-loaf hat fallen to the nape of his neck and held there by the chin cords about his throat. And *then* Sam Yancey's hand tore the gun from its shoulder holster and started it to spitting crimson flame and deadly lead in a loud roar and a stinging cloud of smoke.

"Not a dirty rat o' you leaves this place!" he bellowed from behind his crude barricade.

Three of the startled bandits whirled about to face this new and terrible peril. One of Yancey's slugs found the foremost man and he collapsed to the ground like a sack of meal. The others answered the lookout's fire wildly and the lead spattered with dull thuds into the wooden table top. Pedro himself, sudden fear popping out of his eyes, wheeled about in a flash. Penned! Trapped up! In his heart the breed knew that only over the dead body of Hawkeye Sam Yancey would any of them leave alive through the front doors of the Last Chance. He knew in that instant exactly what the lookout's strange actions had meant. He didn't mean to be cheated of his vengeance!

Meantime a half-dozen men in the crowd, quick to take advantage of that momentary balance in their favor due to Yancey's surprise, dropped hands from over their heads, fell to their knees behind what shelter they could find and took up the fight. From a dozen corners livid streaks of flame and smoke belched out at the trapped outlaws. The piercing, frightened shrieks of the dancing girls added terror to the deadly notes of roaring guns. The whole place was filled with the noise of battle and the thick acrid clouds of burned powder smoke. Black Joe himself leaped for his gun under the bar. Two other outlaws had fallen. They were in the open now: once having lost their advantage of surprise, the odds were as overwhelmingly against them as Pedro had meant the odds to be against Yancey.

Gomez and the other masked bandit alone remained alive enough to continue the fight. Caught between that deadly fire the breed lifted his arms swiftly above his head in token of surrender. Meantime the other outlaw, knowing that the game was utterly lost, chose to die fighting. He whirled like a flash, the muzzle of his six-gun pouring flame and smoke. Black Joe took a slug that seared his forearm. Then his own Colt barked its note of death and the outlaw's gun clattered to the floor. He took two tottering steps forward, then collapsed to the ground. The crowd poured out from behind its barricades, circling Gomez, his fallen partner and Hawkeye Sam Yancey who had advanced into the room from the door, smoking gun in hand. One of the men tore the mask from the breed's face and the ugly bearded countenance was a revealed mask of baffled rage.

"Now talk, y'double crossin' rat!" Sam Yancey's brittle voice snapped full into Pedro's face. The silence that followed that hell of noise and barking guns made his ominous words sound loud and terrible in the strange stillness of the saloon.

"What ees thee difference?" the breed snarled with a jerk of his thumb toward his partner who had collapsed before the bar with Black Joe's slug through his chest. With certain death by the noose facing him, Pedro Gomez sought still to jeer diabolically at the lookout. His lips twisted in a sneering hateful grin. "Thee barkeep, he has cheat you of your man, you hell's cat! That ees thee—"

"Y'mean he's the hombre what drilled me in the back?" Sam interrupted in his frozen voice.

The breed opened his mouth to speak again. But before a single sound came from his throat, the dying bandit raised himself on one elbow.

"Liar!" With all the strength that remained in his pain wracked body he hurled his accusation at Pedro Gomez. "Y'dirty double crossin' liar!" he repeated. In the tense stillness of that bloody gruesome scene his throaty bass gurgle echoed with horrible clarity. The white faced crowd pressed closer the better to hear the man's dramatic last words pouring from bloated red-flecked lips. "The Deering brothers beat Gomez to this job a few weeks ago. He wanted the loot himself but he was scared as hell o' Yancey's gun. When Yancey got both the Deering boys, Gomez drilled the lookout in the back from across the road to get him out o' the way fer his own game. Then he tol' me he had Yancey fixed for this here job. I never knew he was gonna double cross no one! But y'can't pin no damned back-shootin' coward's job on me, y'dirty double crossin' rat! You —you—"

The bandit's head lolled over on his shoulder. Then the life went out of him suddenly in a last inarticulate gasp and his body collapsed all at once, his face burying itself in the sawdust of the floor.

Pedro Gomez's face paled to an ashen gray during the accusing speech. Hawkeye Yancey was looking at him, the cold bitter eyes boring deep into the shifting stare of the cornered breed. For a single instant after the sound of the dying man's voice had echoed into silence, the stillness in the glaringly lit interior of the Last Chance was a palpable terrible thing. At the cold frozen rage snapping in the lookout's stare, men backed instinctively away. A solid wall of blanched grim faces watched Sam Yancey step slowly up to the frightened breed.

"You back-shootin' swine!" The words came from between gritted teeth, the set lips barely opening to allow the escape of the words. "Y'rat o' hell! Y'thought y'had Sam Yancey fixed. An' you would have drilled me in cold blood, thinkin' I'd hold my fire. An' y'even tried double crossin' your dyin' pardner!" The brittle words rose now to a bellow of terrible rage. "Wal, I held my fire— Now I'm givin' you a chance y'never gave no one in your life, y'swine!"

Sam Yancey rammed his gun back into its shoulder holster. The breed's pig-eyes darted in terror from side to side like a cornered rat's. No man moved to aid him.

"Put his gun back in its holster," Yancey ordered quietly of the man who had disarmed the breed. A gasp like that from a single throat came from the astonished crowd. The miner hesitated. "Give him back his gun!" Sam snapped again without turning his head.

The man stepped forward with the breed's gun in his hand, rammed the weapon into its holster and stepped back again quickly.

"Put down your hands!" Yancey snapped at Pedro.

Slowly the breed's arms came down from over his head, his eyes narrowing to thin slits and ablaze with the lust to kill as the full meaning of the look-

out's action became clear to him. His thin lips curled in a leer over the glistening white fangs of his teeth.

"I'm givin' you a chance, y'rat, that y'never—"

Sam Yancey never finished that sentence.

Pedro Gomez knew that his only hope for life lay in a complete escape. He died either by a slug through the heart or a stretched rope about his florid throat for the attempted hold-up. And his way to freedom was barred by that tall gaunt man with the terrible anger of vengeance blazing out of bitter blue eyes. The instant he had his gun securely in its holster again, he waited for no signal from the lookout. Even as Yancey spoke, his right had flashed for the gun butt. Clear of leather, it sent a leaping tongue of flame at Sam from the hip.

This time Sam Yancey never stirred. He was through dodging slugs for one night. Again the breed's gun spat smoke and fire. But the instant that right hand had snapped for the breed's hip, Hawkeye Sam Yancey's right hand had leaped like streaked lightning for his shoulder holster. The blue barreled Colt glittered in the light of the overhead lamps. Out of its muzzle in a cloud of streaking smoke, the lead ball tore clean through Pedro's heart. The breed fell like a felled log and even as he fell he fired his third and last shot. Only the first slug scored a hit, tearing into the lookout's shoulder, the blood quickly drenching his shirt from chest to waist. Yancey's second ball tore into the breed's already lifeless body.

For a moment after that gruesome finish of Yancey's feud, no one stirred. Sam stood, swaying slightly where he stood, his smoking gun held steadily in his cupped right hand. Then the crowd, coming suddenly to life, pressed forward, everyone talking excitedly at once. Yancey paid no heed. In a frozen calm he holstered his gun and turned toward the bar.

Black Joe, who had vanished unseen, came bursting back through the doors with old Doc Hartley in tow. He took in the scene in a flash.

"Thank Gawd, he didn't get you, Sam!" the owner of the Last Chance breathed earnestly.

"What the hell!" Doc Hartley growled in his gruff, booming bass voice at Yancey. "You full o' lead again? Well, I'll be damned!" This last more in the nature of blasphemy as he barked his shins against Yancey's barricade by the door.

Quickly Black Joe darted behind the bar and poured a stiff hooker of whiskey for Yancey, talking rapidly as he worked.

"I apologizes, Sam, s'help me Gawd I apologizes fer thinkin' you'd gone yaller. Why in hell's thunder didn't you tell me that— Here, Sam," he finished. "You're weak as a kitten. It'll help you when Doc Hartley starts messin' you all up!"

Meanwhile the doctor of Snake Bar had cut away part of Yancey's shirt and was probing deftly at the gaping ugly wound. Sam reached over and drained the proffered drink, leaning heavily on the bar.

"Hold 'im, Doc," Black Joe muttered to Hartley. "He's all done up! Better get him into the back room 'fore he cashes in—"

Doc Hartley turned from the wounded Yancey, an expression of profound disgust and undisguised admiration on his grizzled face.

"Cash in!" he snorted loudly while the crowd boomed its relief in laughter. "Y'can't kill this hombre wi' lead nohow! Damme ef I don't think the son-of-a-gun's got nine charmed lives!"

Black Joe grinned broadly. Yancey, pale and weak from loss of blood, breathed softly through a bitter, pain-wracked smile.

"Wal, then stop diggin' et me, Doc. That hurts like hell!"

"Shut up! I gotta get the ball out, don't I? Y'got more damned lead in your carcass now than any natural man could live with!"

WHEN SOUTHPAWS MEET

By Palmer Hoyt

A mental southpaw heaves one right to the button.

YOU can never tell by lookin' at a guy's mug what kind of ideas he's got stored up behind his face. I mean, that prob'ly the guy that runs the elevator in your building wants to be president or your garbage man might have pictures of himself beatin' Sir Walter Hagen in a 36-hole match with the King of England headin' the gallery.

Yes sir, ambition takes a lot of funny twists but it's never so queer as when manifested in those members of the baseball pitchin' profession as heaves 'em from the left side, either physically or mentally.

Now take Rube Golden, whose fast ball was as smokey as a morning in Pittsburgh. To look at the Rube you wouldn't think ambition gnawed at his vitals. No, you'd of thought his only worry was whether he'd be able to get hot biscuits for supper or would he work on Thursday or Friday or whether the blonde at the cigar counter was kiddin' or was she really married. But Rube did have dreams of greatness—dreams which kept this baseball pilot awake plenty of nights.

The first I ever hear of Rube Golden was in a telegram from Doc Hicks:

GOT YOUR MAN STOP RUBE GOLDEN CAN WIN IN ANY LEAGUE STOP HES CRAZY BUT HES GOOD STOP HE HAS JUST WIN THIRTEEN STRAIGHT IN TEXAS LEAGUE STOP I WARN YOU HES CRAZY STOP TEN THOUSAND FISH WILL TAKE HIM STOP HURRY STOP OTHERS AFTER HIM STOP WIRE ORDERS YOURS DOC HICKS

That listened big because did we need pitchers? Does Eskimos need blubber? Us, the great Mustangs, was wallowin' around in the second division of the Coast League when we should ought to of been on top and out of sight.

I'm Bill Hopper, manager of the Mustangs. I said buy him. X. B. Miller, our prexy-owner says, "Look out for a nutty lefthander." When he sees the telegram, he adds, "I can handle 'em, but look out anyways."

I says: "They're all nutty but them pitchers is my specialty. Anyways, we got to do somethin'."

"Buy him," X. B. orders, "if you think he's a winner, but remember you gotta be responsible. I don't want no more riots on the club. If Doc Hicks admits this guy is a little queer, he ought to be in a straightjacket."

"Maybe he oughta be in a straightjacket," I rallies back, "but he ain't nutty enough he couldn't win 13 straight."

"Any guy who wins 13 straight must be nuts," says X. B. who is as superstitious as a cornfield negro. "Twelve's all right or 14 but 13—br-rr-rr!"

"They gotta win 13 before they can say 14," I says, but X. B. sheds that. He don't allow nothin' to cross his jinxes.

I wires Doc Hicks:

THIS GUY CAN BE NUTTIER THAN A CUCKOO CLOCK BUT IF HE CAN PITCH PUT HIM ON A WESTBOUND TRAIN

That was Friday. I ain't superstitious but I shouldn't of did such a thing on Friday. Well, the days flit by and we're losin' ball games with sterlin' regularity. Was our pitchers bad? I tell you how bad they was, we had to have 14 runs to even be ahead by the sixth. Red Silver was our only winner and he was wore to a shadow doin' two starts a week to say nothin' of relief work for which he was always cryin' himself.

Came the next Sat'day. We have lose four straight to the Hollywood Hippos and the Portland ball fans is about as much interested in us as whether Doc Cook discovered the pole. It's about 1:25 an' we're set for a doubleheader. They's mebbe 500 trustin' souls in the stands. Our boys is about ready to get slaughtered again and Pecos Pulver, the umps, is already dustin' off the platter.

Just to keep my hand in, I'm standin' up there argyin' with Pecos about a decision off us the day before. My heart ain't in it but it's always a pleasure to argy with Pecos.

"Mornin', gents!" a voice breaks in an' I look up to see a big long husky givin' us a freckled-face grin. This arrival is clad in the last word o' fashion and his natty Panama is dropped down over one ear to reveal a lot of sunburned brown hair. "Mornin', gents!"

"It ain't mornin'," growls Pecos in the friendly way umpires has. "An' anyways, what are you doin' out here?"

"I ain't decided yet," says cheerful, grabbin' a ball out of the umps side pocket which is just bustin' out with horsehides. "Is this here a regerlation Coast league apple?"

"Yeah," admits Pecos who can't think of nothin' else to say.

"I want t' know," says the guy. "It don't look like it."

With that he cuts loose with his right arm an' throws the pill over the right field fence which is a good long heave for anyone.

"Them balls is a trifle light," he says judiciously.

"Say, you big ham," Pecos chortles, purple with rage, but the guy don't pay no attention to him. Then the umps flips another ball out of his pocket and holds it up, critical-like. "That there ball is regerlation in ever' respect."

"Oh, yeah?" this new feller wants to know as he grabs the ball out of the bluecoat's hand. He takes a step and slung it over the centerfield fence. The umps jaw dropped with surprise and he growls as the crowd, such as it was,

shouts their approval. As Pecos gets red in the face the big idea dawns on me. I turns to the new feller. "Say," I says, real bright-like, "you're Rube Golden ain't you? Say, if you can sling a baseball that far with your right hand, how far can you sling one with your left?"

"My left?" says this bird lookin' as surprised as a rooster with 12 eggs under him. "Say, I ain't ambidextrous."

"Never heard of him," I comes back fast. "I didn't say you were; I said how far could you sling a ball with your left hand?"

"Did you think," says this mug with a hurt smile, "that I was one of them lefthanders?"

"Well, I been lookin' for Rube Golden," I says, "an' they ain't no law against a lefthander bein' called Rube. All the good ones was, such as Rube Waddell, Rube Marquard. . . ."

"You annoy me," the baseball boy friend admits. "I'm Rube Golden but I ain't no nutty southpaw. I'm a righthander. You'll excuse me if I remark you got a terrible ball club. I watched 'em yesterday. Mebbe with a little good pitchin' they might win a game at that. . . ."

"An' I suppose you got that?"

"Well," says the good lookin' mug, "for 1000 slugs a month I might show you somethin'. . . ."

"Five hundred," I says. "An' if you don't show somethin', back to Texas."

"Oh, yeah?" he wants to know. "Well, I tell you. I ain't pitchin' for no 500 a month. I wouldn't take my clothes off less'n a thousand but there's my proposition. You got two ball games you're goin' to lose to-day. I'll pitch 'em both. If I win 'em, it's a thousand; if I don't, it's 500. Okeh?"

"It's a bet," I growls, takin' a chance on X. B. Miller who should of been a southpaw himself, he's that temperamental. "How quick can you get into a suit?"

"Five minutes if you get me the suit," he admits and I rushes him to the dugout entrance to the dressin' rooms, after gettin' Pecos to promise he'd wait the five minutes. Rube was as good as his threat. In five minutes he had draped a ball suit on his big frame and was out warmin' up. Pecos bein' sore about throwin' them balls out of the park, wouldn't give him much time to warm up, but that didn't make no difference to Rube. He went out to the mound hatin' himself about as much as a movie matinee idol. This Rube is no retirin' violet an' just before he pitches his first one, he takes off his cap an' in loud tones announces:

"Ladies and gents! The Mustangs is practically now out of their slump. I, Rube Golden, the great pitcher, am now on the payroll. Play ball."

That don't sit so good with Pecos who kind of figgers he ought to be runnin' the ball game but he lets it pass and the game's on.

This overgrown animal cookie from Texas might of been nuts, but he could pitch, and how!

Horse Burke was the first Hollywooden soldier to be up. Butch Donegal, our trusty backstop, squats behind the plate, spits a pint or so of tobaccer juice into the dust and gives his signal. Rube shakes him off. Butch tries it again. Once more the Rube gives him the shakes. That ain't so good with me because Butch, while he ain't smart, knows every hitter in the league and knows what, where and when to feed 'em.

Well, the third time's the charm, and Golden winds up as graceful as a boa constrictor swingin' round a tree. His right arm comes over with an easy swing and the apple sails down the line. It was a high, hard one, right at Horse's coco. Fast? Say, if this Rube would of been in the late German gunpowder plot, they wouldn't of needed no French seventy-fives. Down goes the esteemed Mr. Burke. Gettin' throwed at wasn't no novelty for him because he has been dusted off in all languages includin' the Scandihoovian.

Horse gets up, shakin' his fist and

mumblin' curses, but he might as well of been on Custer's last stand as far as Rube was concerned. The young Texan remembered the Alamo and the next pitch was down the same groove. Again Burke just barely falls out of the way of that horsehide cannon ball. When he gets up out of the dust this time, he starts out with a bat but thinks better of it when Rube starts in to meet him.

Anyhow, it wasn't hard to see that Horse was as leery of Rube after that as a calf of a hungry wolf. The next two pitches is right down the aisle and Burke takes two strikes without ever lifting his bat off'n his shoulder. Horse takes a swing at the next one but his bat is slow and the twistin' horsehide is in Butch's big glove before the hickory ever gets there.

This Rube is plenty smart, too. The next guy up was Bones Hannahan and Bones, expectin' a dust-off, kept his hind foot as loose as a drunken sailor. But it wasn't no bean ball he got. It was a slow one, a knuckler that floated up lookin' like the side of a barn door. It crossed Bonesy because Rube got it off with his full swing and it looked like it was goin' to be a fast ball until it got started on his way.

The horsehide come floatin' just under shoulder high, twistin' an' turnin', makin' faces, thumbin' its nose at Hannahan. It was too fat. Bonesy couldn't resist it. He set himself and took a Babe Ruth swing at the old apple. Hannahan hit it all right but he just got an underneath piece of this diving, twisting pill and piled it up in the air about 40 feet. Rube lopes down off the mound, drops his glove on his hip and backs into it. Just as the Rube catches the pop-up, who should nose his way into the dugout but X. B. Miller.

"Fire that rooster," he says, wavin' at the Rube. "Nobody can't clown it on my club. The fans don't like it. Get rid of him. Who is he, anyways?"

"That," I says, "is the great Rube Golden. He's goin' to cost you 1000 bucks a month. Like it and look it."

"That guy ain't goin' t' cost me nothin'," says X. B., swellin' up like a poisoned pup full of toadstools. "A grand a month? Hell, I never heard of it. Anyways, this guy ain't Rube Golden. Rube's a southpaw."

"Oh, yeah?" I lets on. "Well you can fool me if he ain't Golden. This is Rube, an' he is a southpaw—a mental southpaw. He throws right handed but if I don't miss my guess, he does all his intellectual calisthenics, if any, on his wrong side."

Rube walks Eddie McLean whilst we're arguin' but that don't mean anything because he ends the inning right afterwards by strikin' out Biff Thomas, the league's leading slugger.

"What do you think now?" I wants to know as Biff is set down with a goose egg.

"We'll see some more," growls X. B.

We did. Rube slid through that first game like he was a greased pig. Two hits was all the Hippos got an' they didn't produce no runs, not even if Rube did give 'em six walks. While this was goin' on, we got seven runs and thus win our first shut-out in months. That was too much for X. B. He said he'd hafta go out and eat a hamburger and drink a cup of coffee between games.

"How'd you like that?" says the Rube as he comes swaggerin' in.

"Well," I says pessimistic-like—I always am with pitchers as I don't want to give 'em no big ideas in their heads —"that wasn't so bad!"

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," says this shrinkin' violet after he has taken a drink and a fresh hew of eatin' tobacco. "Wait till I get warmed up."

Everybody but the Hippos give three rousing cheers when Rube takes the mound for the second session. They didn't cheer because they had a idee that Golden was going to do it to them again. Rube started great and set 'em down in order the first canto. X. B. came in just as the third Hollywood entry of the inning went out like a candle in a gale.

"Gawd sakes," our Mr. Miller wants to know. "You ain't pitchin' him again are you?"

"What does it look like?" I says bein' somethin' of a smart cracker myself. "I thought it was him."

"What are you tryin' to do, lose some ball games?" say X. B. "You can't stand prosperity. Don't you know enough not to kill the goose that lays the platinum eggs?"

"That's over my depth," I says. "But outside of never layin' an egg in his life, this Rube ain't no goose, he's a nut. He wants to pitch both games and he pitches 'em."

And the Reuben did pitch 'em. That second shuffle was better'n the first. We had tougher goin' because Andy Hendershott was in the box for the Hippos and Andy was goin' great. We got a run in the fifth and that looked like all there was goin' to be. But it didn't worry me none because the way Rube was burnin' 'em down the alley, that one looked as big as Mount Hood. Butch, our esteemed catcher, was gettin' plenty sore, what with bein' shook off his signs an' ever'thing but outside that we was sittin' pretty.

We went into the first of the ninth with the score 1 to 0 in our favor. Looked like a Roman holiday. Fans was slingin' their straw derbies to the wind and what have you. Everybody was happy but Butch and the Hippos. Even X. B. admitted life wasn't so bad.

Just when we had the ball game by the neck, trouble develops as spelled with a big T. The first hitter up in the last inning caused it. Rube shook Butch off until our big backstop was plumb out of signals and ragin' like a one-ton bull with a red rag tied in his nose ring. Butch tries about two more signals which puts him fresh out of signs. Then he comes tearin' out from behind the plate like a locoed war tank, sheddin' his mask and big glove as he came.

"Y'bum," he shouts at Rube. "Who's runnin' this here BATT'ry?"

Right then Butch didn't have no time for further orations because him and Rube had arrived at the same spot at the same time. Our young Mr. Golden was a little unprepared for the intensity of feeling which our Mr. Donegal felt in the matter and he wasn't entirely a success in dodgin' Mr. Donegal's right hand. The blow took Rube alongside the chewer and down he toppled; unwillin', but down anyways.

He was up in a jiffy, lookin' more surprised than angry. Butch was all set to sock him again but before he could accomplish his fell purpose, Pecos, th' battlin' umps, had grabbed him by the neck.

"Outa th' game," says the blue coat. "An' I'm plasterin' on a $50 fine for you to poultice your memory with."

"Oh, yeah?" howls Butch takin' a swing at the umps. "I'll fine you, y'big sausage."

Butch meant swell but his wallop didn't land for the very good reason I was ridin' his arm. But Pecos figured the spirit was as good as the deed so he turns his sentence into 100 fish and ten days out.

I and the boys on the bench lugs Butch off the field before he got a grand and the rest of the summer. We slung Butch into the dressin' room with orders to stay put and I rushed forth and ordered Clint Ariel, second string catcher, in to backstop. Clint's about three pounds heavier than a one-ton truck and twice as tough.

Clint give some signals and Rube shakes him off until Clint finally hollers, "Go ahead and sling 'em, y'big monkey!"

Which is exactly what Rube does. Pitch? I mean he pulled a Rube Waddell like when Waddell was at his best. Rube started right in walkin' 'em. He slung four balls to the first man up just as fast as he could pile 'em across. With the score 1 to 0 in our favor, the first of the ninth, none down and one on it didn't look so hot to me. It looked worse than that to X. B.

X. B. demands I should take him

out but outside of the one we win that same day we ain't come so clost in many innin's, so I leave him in. I arrive at this decision whilst Rube shoves four more balls across and the sacks is almost loaded. I got my hand up to motion him out when he slips over the first strike of the canto. Naturally the Hippos is waitin', so Rube steams up and gets by with two more fast ones right over the heart of the pan and Rusty Segreth, the hitter, was out of there before he knew when.

This Rube's got his nerve. The bags is almost full and one out but that don't keep him from shyin' one at Andy Henderson's bean. Andy sprawls as flat as a Chicago copper at a machine gun party. If Andy had his foot in the bucket before, he practically had it in a horse trough now and all he did was wave a weak good-by at three zipping fast ones as they whistled by for strikes.

"Two out, two on and the score still 1 to 0 in our favor," I says, givin' X. B. Miller a playful job in the ribs. "I ain't so dumb."

"Them that laughs last, laughs best," says X. B. as Horse Burke, one of the best hitters on the Hollywood club, comes up. "I don't see how this guy is goin' to get outa this."

"I do," I says, as Rube swishes over a smoke ball for the first strike.

That made young Burke sore and when the next one comes cradlin' through, he takes a Round Robin swing at it. Lucky for us he only got a piece of it and it goes for a foul and strike two. Two out. Two strikes and no balls on the hitter. Two on and us still one to the good. Looked all right to me. X. B. was moanin' but he always is.

And then with ever'thing sittin' pretty as a democrat governor in the Carolines, Rube comes through with a wild pitch. It was wild, too. Hit the grandstand. A lucky bounce back brought it to our box-car catcher and the runners was held on second and third. Heart failure? I could feel the old pump clear down in the shoes. Just when I'm feelin' worst, Rube cuts loose with another pitch. It was wild, too, but Clint managed to hook it in his big glove. Two balls and two strikes. And another one—Pecos bellered, "Ball Three!"

Well, there we was. Three and two. Two out. Two on. The score 1 to 0 in our favor. I opened my eyes and took my fingers out of my ears. I figured I just as well see the winnin' runs pour in.

"Take him out!" X. B. orders hoarsely.

"Y're drunk," I admits as the Rube pitches. And that heave marked him as a real chucker to me. What have I always told my dumbbell pitchers? Why, I've always told 'em to use their best ball in the clinch.

And that's what Rube did. He shot his fast one, the one with the hop on it, through there so plumb rapid that it must of looked like a split pea to Horse Burke. Burke takes a swing at same but he just as well of saved his stren'th. He missed it two feet and lights was out.

"How'd you like it?" says the Rube comin' in fresh as a daisy. "Say, ain't I just a helluva pitcher? Did I slay 'em?"

"Y'pretty near slayed me," I admits. "Why take chances?"

"I wasn't takin' no chances," says this shrinkin' violet. "I was havin' fun."

"After this," I says, "have your fun at home."

X. B. and I sits outside on the bench for a spell after Rube vanished into the dressin' room and made the most out of winnin' two games all to oncet. Then our precious gloatin' was busted in on by a sound from the dressin' room which was like a cross between a Russion revolution and a municipal dog fight. We hurried in. We arrived just in time to see Dutch Donegal and Rube engagin' in what promised to be a very chummy fight indeed.

"Wait!" I howls and the guys stop

reluctant, like a couple of strange tom cats.

I pawed into a locker and produced four battered but still efficient boxin' gloves.

"You fellers is bound to fight," I says. "So you'll fight right. A reg'lar bout. Three-minute rounds. Okay?"

"Oke!" says they in chorus.

I didn't need to of worried about the rounds. One was enough. This Butch Donegal was always known as one of the best fighters in the Coast league but he wasn't no match for Rube the Great.

"No fresh mutt outa th' Texas league can't make no monkey outa me," Butch howls as they stand there waitin' for me to say when.

"Right," says Rube, unruffled. "It's been done a long time."

"Let her go!" I yells to bust up the chin music.

Butch charged in like a angry rhino. This time his rush wasn't so hot. Rube sidesteps neatly and swings a neat right home to Donegal's jaw. Butch shakes his head like a maddened buffalo and comes back for more, his arms swingin' like a Dutch windmill gone berserk. Rube, cool, calm and collected as a ice box cowcumber, steps inside those whirling arms and laid a flock of rights and lefts onto Butch where they'd do the most good. The punches staggered Butch and a couple of rights and lefts to the bread basket cut his wind. Donegal drops back to get his breath which was a mistake because right then Rube saw a swell chance to drop a sledge hammer right behind Butch's ear. The punch was a darb. It spun Donegal around like he was wound up. Rube timed a left perfect to catch Butch on the point and our first string catcher was out as cold as South Polar scenery.

"It's too bad," Rube says, "but he had to have it. He wouldn't of been happy without it. I'm a great pitcher but I'm a even greater boxfighter."

"Oh, yeah?" Clint Ariel wants t' know. Clint's got the disposition of an unoiled buzz saw when roiled. "I got a idea that you ain't so awful hot."

I tried to head this one off, figgerin' Rube'd done enough what with pitchin' two full games an' lickin' one of the toughest mugs in baseball, but he laughed at me. "This here is more fun than I've had since maw got her head caught in a beartrap. Put the gloves on him. I'll soon smack him down."

Clint had a great reputation as a fist fighter but he must of bought it at some second-hand store. We finally got the gloves on him and he come rushin' out to do battle. It wasn't much of a battle. They was just two real blows struck. Rube socked Clint one which would of jarred a small locomotive and our Mister Ariel went down with a crash which shook the dressin' room like a California earthquake.

"Which proves," says Rube, "that I'm a much greater fighter than I am a pitcher, which makes me a pretty fair fighter."

AT that you couldn't get sore at the Rube. He was just a big kid ordinarily. Clint and Butch wasn't sore at him. And those fights was the makin' of Rube. After that he got along great with his catchers and they wasn't no stoppin' Rube. He win three in a row, dropped one and win four more. That give our other pitchers the idea and we begin to climb. From last place we clambered into the first division in one month and from the worst drawin' card in the league we became the best.

We was sittin' pretty until we picked up Red Jaggers on waivers from the Seattle Suds. Red was a pro pug once, not a very good one, but still a pro. Well the first thing Red done when he joined the Mustangs was to choose Rube. It was a bad choice for Red and a worse one for the Mustangs. Rube polished him off just about as quick as he had Butch. That was all right but all of a sudden I notice that Rube's sittin' around on the bench all the time with his head in his hands. He's moonin' about somethin', ain't got a

good word for nobody and is a changed gent all the way round.

It was a rift in our flute, too, because Rube was just about all our music. He wouldn't give me no satisfaction and I couldn't realize what it was all about until one day he come out and volunteered the desired information himself. He says (can you imagine it) he wants to quit baseball and go to prizefightin' for a livin'.

"A promoter up in Spokane heard about me trimmin' all these guys and he wants me to main event for him two weeks from to-night." All this from Rube, who continues: "He says I oughta be th' next heavyweight champ. I've always wanted to be heavyweight champ. I'd be a great champ like Sullivan or Dempsey. I would knock 'em all for a loop an' fight ever' night."

As soon as I could shake Rube, I run to X. B. Miller.

"What can we do now?" says X. B. after he'd heard my tale of woe. "C'mon now, Bill, you're so hot handlin' nutty pitchers. Go do somethin'!"

It was then I got an idea and it was an idea. Right away I sent a wire to Fred Pelkey up in Aberdeen, Wash. You mebbe heard of Fred. He wasn't never no champion but he kept more guys from bein' champ than the New York Boxin' Commission. Fred was the great trial horse. Naturally, it's a cinch Pelkey's goin' to kick seven kinds of blue-eyed Hades out of the Rube. I figure the Rube will think he's just a ham an' egg ballplayer and will be cured of all his heavyweight prizefight ambitions.

It's a Lulu of a idea. Even X. B. Miller admits that.

Two days later a third baseman by the name of Red Scully joins the club. He's supposed to be from the Three Eye league. He don't look like no third baseman. He ain't. Of course, you have guessed already it's Fred Pelkey. I tell Fred the plot.

"Kick hell out of this bevo fighter," I says. "Take him like the late U. S. Grant took the city of Richmond, Va., and you get one thousand slugs cold cash."

"This guy is practically badly beat up right now," says Fred who hates dough like he does his two eyes. "But what's the loser's end?"

"They ain't no loser's end," I says, "but I am so sure you can manhandle this monkey that it's one thousand bucks, and your found for the job."

"Oke," says Fred and my mind is easy for the first time in weeks. We didn't have to board Fred long. That very mornin' we had battin' practice an' this Rube got the idea he wanted to warm up. We got Fred out there in a ball suit in which he looks like a kangaroo in a tuxedo. He's the only guy around that ain't busy so Rube selects him to catch a few.

"Put on that catcher's glove," says Rube. "I want to sling a few."

"I ain't no catcher," says Fred who ain't never seen a baseball outside of a store window. "I'm a third base player."

"You could fool me," says our Mister Golden. "But slip on that glove. I gotta loosen up."

Fred finally done it. Rube shows him where to stand and then cuts loose. It's only about half speed for the Rube but it's plenty fast at that. Fred forgets what his glove is for and catches it in the belly.

"What are you tryin' to do?" yells Fred. "Murder me?"

"I just as well," shouts Rube back. "You ain't no third baseman."

"I'm as much a third baseman as you are a fighter," says Fred.

"Is that so," demands Rube who has come in close. "Is that so?"

Just then Rube takes a swing which gives me a laugh. Fred discards his big mitt as he ducks under the punch and the battle is joined.

And it was a battle! Fred's big shout is infightin'. What a body puncher that baby was. Pelkey goes right to work on Rube's middle and lashes home punches that would of dented a hippo. But they didn't seem to bother this

tough cookie any and while Fred's batterin' his midrift with a machine gun tempo, Golden is crackin' some dynamite sugared wallops off Pelkey's mug.

They broke for a moment by mutual consent and then they come together again like a couple of strange bulls with but a single thought. Rube lashed a right at Pelkey's ear which would surely of shook that worthy up if it would of landed square. Fred slipped the punch with a roll of his head and come in to Rube's bread box with a murderous straight left. The punch loosened Golden up and, as he come over, Fred slammed home a beautiful right hook. The blow didn't travel a foot but it had all of Fred's 188 pounds of raw meat in it and Rube went down. He's up on the first bounce, though, that's how tough a cookie he is. They's a surprised look on his freckled, sweaty face but he ain't nothin' daunted. Oh, no, indeed!

Fred's standin' there shakin' his right like he'd cracked it on Rube's iron phiz and he ain't exactly expectin', after landin' that wallop, to have a wounded lion on his hands. But that's what he's got. Rube shakes his head, lets out a kind of muffled roar and comes chargin' in for all he's worth. Rube's big fists are workin' like pistons on a runaway loggin' engine.

Fred done all the things a pug's supposed to do when a hurricane like that breaks on him but it wasn't no use. He'd never been tangled up with no angry, saber-tooth tiger before. Fred ducked and dodged, punched and counter-punched, but it didn't seem to make no difference. Rube wasn't to be denied. A right and a left cracked home to Fred's jaw, he bein' a little handicapped by havin' spiked shoes on which clogged his footwork. The blows dizzied him and he dropped his guard long enough to catch a cannon ball in the belly.

He grunted like a stuck Poland China and staggered some more which gave Rube a chance to bring one up from the ground. This here wallop was a punch and it cocked Pelkey on the point. He was a tough mug but even tough mugs can't take them kind and go uncracked and down goes Fred in a tired heap.

"I'm sorry," says Rube when Fred come to pretty soon. "I didn't mean to sock you so hard."

"I'm sorry, too," moans Mister Pelkey. "But I didn't mind bein' socked. What you oughta be sorry about is havin' such a hard head. I broke two knuckles on your ivory dome. That's $500 a knuckle and it ain't enough."

Well, that was that an' mebbe you think X. B. Miller didn't give me the razz. Especially after Rube went down town one night and kicked over some pool hall McGump with an inflated reputation. Imagine my embarrassment when he come back braggin' about his conquest—especially after he'd licked a dude that could of taken six of them McGumps with one hand. But of course I couldn't tell him he'd licked Fred Pelkey so I had to listen to him citin' this street brawl as a swell reason for him to turn professional pug.

Well, we finally headed off that Spokane fight by buyin' off the dumb promoter and Rube turned in another triplet of wins for us. But we was sittin' on a volcano and knew it, because just about every day Rube come around to me and said he figgered it was time he was startin' on his drive to be heavyweight champ. Each time I give him the horse laugh but each time it was harder to kid him out of it.

The summer wore on. We climbed right on up the first division into a virtual tie with the Frisco Phantoms. The tie continued as the season neared the end. If they won, we won; if we lost, they lost. In two seven-game series, we edged them four to three each and it was a cinch that with Rube, we'd give Portland their first pennant in years.

Just like in the story books it was all up to our young hero. September rolled up as September has a habit of

doin' ever year and by then we was down to cases. We was to close the season on the second week with a series against the Phantoms and the way both clubs was goin' ever'body knew that was the money series.

The first week we was up against the Hippos again whose measure we now had. It's a moral and cock-eyed cinch we take five or six out of seven from them but that ain't goin' to help us much because the Phantoms is playin' Seattle in the north that same week and they has the Suds jinxed just like we got the Hippos. But anyway it looked like a even-Steven, with us on top.

Then Rube decided to quit again.

"A week from to-night," says Rube comin' in t' my office early one morning when I was dreamin' how nice a pennant would look on our flagstaff, "I quit. A week from to-night I'm goin' to fight Young Rollo, the Chicago Kayo King, in Seattle."

"Applesauce," I starts but Rube don't stop talkin'.

"Applesauce," I says again. They was a lot more of the same but it all wound up on the same spool and when Rube finally wandered out, it was apparent he aimed to quit.

My grief struck meditations is busted into by X. B. Miller, who has heard everything from his office.

"As a handler of pitchers," says X. B., "you're a washout. You claim to be a doctor for nutty lefthanders, why—"

"This guy ain't no lefthander."

"Well, he's lefthanded in the head," X. B. overrides my protest. "An' anyway they ain't no difference between lefthanders and righthanders."

"No," I says, "you could fool me. What I started to say was that while this guy ain't no lefthander, he's worse than any of 'em because he's a mental southpaw. Now I can—"

"You've done enough," says X. B. "And you ain't done nothin'. Now I've got a idea. We got to have Rube for that week against the Phantoms or we lose. Right?"

"Right!"

"Well, did you ever hear of Wilkie Jackson?"

"Do you mean Jack the Giant Killer? Who ain't?"

"The same," says X. B. with a pleased smile at my intelligence. "Well, Wilkie owes me a favor. I staked him before he won the middleweight title an' he's a grateful cuss. Wilkie can lick any man in the world and all the heavies know it. He only weighs 160 at most and looks small. He's in Oakland right now and I'm gonna get him up here. I got a plot."

"I hope it works," I says.

"Don't worry," says X. B. "Ever'thing I figger out always works. All you gotta do is keep Rube kidded along for another couple days until I can get Wilkie up here and mebbe you think I won't wreck Rube's fightin' ambitions."

Which looked easy, but wasn't. I finally ribbed Rube into stayin' a week but on the third day he decided to quit again so I told him to go tell X. B. as I was wore out listenin' to him. He says oke and I trails to see what happens, not knowin' whether our owner's big moment had arrived or not.

"I'm quittin' baseball," says Rube as he enters in to the office. "I'm through."

"Through?" says X. B. like he'd never heard of such a thing. "Through? What are you goin' to do? Go to barberin'?"

"I'm a fighter," says Rube, kind of bashful-like. "I figger to be heavyweight champion. They's room for a good man in that job."

X. B. should of been an actor. At that news he laughed until tears run down his cheeks whilst Rube stands there blushin' an' shiftin' from one foot to another like a hired man interviewing his best girl.

"What's so funny about that?" Rube demands, gettin' kind of sore. "I licked all these guys," and the Rube runs off a list of his victims, includin' Red Sculley and the pool room punk.

"A bunch of mutts," says X. B. indulgin' himself in large laughter. "I never heard of 'em. Say, you ain't serious Rube, but if you was I'd say you couldn't lick nobody. Why, you couldn't even lick our new batboy."

"I ain't fightin' kids," says Rube.

"Oh, you ain't," says a new voice an' I peek in to see a short, squat individual standin' by X. B.'s desk. Right away I know this must be Wilkie Jackson himself. He looks even smaller in his street clothes than he does in the ring. "Well, I may be a kid but I don't like to be referred to thus."

"Go sit down," growls Rube. "I got no business with you."

"Oh, no," says Wilkie bristlin' up. "Well, I got business with you. I don't like your looks."

"Oh, no?" says Rube.

"No!" says Wilkie and steps up an' pops Rube one right on the kisser. Rube forgot about not sockin' kids right then an' aims a bone crusher at Wilkie's snoot but it don't land. Wilkie jumps out of danger and X. B. comes between 'em whilst I come out to give what aid I may.

"No rowdyism," says X. B., grieved-like, "or I'll have to fire you both. Now gents, they's a rule on this club that employes settle all differences with the gloves. I invoke that there rule."

It was agreeable all round so we repairs to the dressin' rooms and the boys slip into some sweat shirts and peels off their shoes while X. B. and I dig up the gloves.

Right then and there was fought one of the nicest little battles that was ever put on, gate or no gate. Rube brought the fight to Wilkie, figgerin' that this punk kid should oughta be knocked out. He brought the fight but he didn't bring the punches. Rube couldn't land 'em. Wilkie was a shadow; a phantom that writhed in and out, but a phantom that popped in some smackin' blows when and if he pleased. For three rounds Wilkie gave this game Golden a boxin' lesson and then at some signal from X. B. he started in layin' the leather to him.

It was then Rube showed his heart. Hopelessly licked, Rube came in through the barrage of brown gloves to land a few wallops that staggered Wilkie. In fact, Rube knocked the champion down twice before he realized that Rube had it. But it wasn't for long. Wilkie'd had enough. Sudden-like he feints with his left and shimmies a stiff right hand into Rube's face. Golden tried to counter but that laid him wide open for Wilkie's left which shot up like a trip hammer on a rampage. How a little man could hit so hard I often wondered, but that punch caught Rube's button, lifted him off the floor and he was out.

Rube eventually came to and we went out of there with him talkin' to himself. It wasn't Rube's turn to pitch, but at noon he comes in the office and admits that as a fighter he'd be a good oyster fisherman. "I'm off this ring racket for life," he says. "I don't want to be no Art Shires. Say, if you guys won't say nothin' about this, I'd like to win that ball game for you this afternoon. Anyways, I need the exercise."

That was jake by us and after Rube had gone out X. B. spent a half-hour tellin' me how he could handle pitchers and that lefthanders and righthanders was all the same.

That was fine. Rube called off the Seattle fight and spent a half-hour tellin' me that if he didn't get to start four times against the Phantoms, he was through with everything. That listened great to me because four starts for Rube meant four wins or at the worst three, and with Red Silver back in the best shape of his career, we're a cinch to cop the flag.

Yes, we're settin' pretty. Of course it all depends on Rube but I gotta hand it to X. B., he seems to have cured him. X. B. gotta hand it to himself too, so we're practically unanimous on the subject.

We did better'n we expected against

the Hippos and copped six of the seven. That wasn't any better'n it sounds though because the Phantoms got five out of seven from the Suds which still left us a virtual tie. But we're sittin' pretty. Virtually all the reserve seats is sold out for the series next week and it looks like the biggest box office in years.

Well, to bob a long tale, with Rube pitchin' fire balls we win the first one 3-0 and nothin' will do but he's gotta come back on a delayed iron man stunt and win the second 6-3. He was practically unhittable in both starts. The third game we lose on a close one, 2-1, when Red Silver gets wild in the ninth on one batter and the next one singles, steals second and then third and comes home on a wild pitch.

Rube wanted to pitch next day but I wouldn't let him as I figgered he needed two days' rest and we lost another 7-5 though Windy Jacobs turns in a nice game.

It looked like we was a cinch to win now. We break even in the first four and with Rube in the hole good for two more I can't see how we can lose the pennant.

X. B. and I are sittin' in the office that night re-doin' the day's game when all of a sudden Rube walks in. He's all dolled up and he's got a suitcase in his hand.

"Why all the disguise?" I says cheerful-like.

"It ain't no disguise," Rube answers just as chipper. "I'm leavin'."

"Leavin'?" demands I and X. B. in the same breath. "You can't."

"No?" says Rube. "Mebbe not, but I'm goin'. I gotta consider my duty to the fight fans. I just gotta wire from Wilkie Jackson, the middleweight champ. . . ."

"What?" says we in unison.

"Yes, you guys thought you was smart framin' me, didn't you. Well, I'm wise that wasn't no batboy. That was Wilkie Jackson, the greatest fighter since Stanley Ketchel. No wonder he licked me. Well, he got sorry for me thinkin' I was licked by a batboy and he wired me who he was and he would like to manage me into the heavyweight championship on the side. He's got a fight for me and I'm leavin'."

Rube's word was bottled in bond and he was outa there before we knew what was up. As we dashed to the door, we heard the roar of his straight eight and knew they wasn't no use followin'.

X. B. comes back and sits down weakly.

"Now we're a cinch to lose the pennant," he says. "To think how that dizzy Wilkie doublecrossed me. I don't see how come."

"I'll tell you," I says. "They was one very small item a great man like you overlooked when he framed this deal."

"What's that?" moans X. B.

"Well," I says, "you forgot that this here Wilkie Jackson is a southpaw too. And boy, when southpaws meet, even if one is only a mental lefthander, somethin' is bound to happen like nobody's business."

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BULLDOG'S BOOK

By
Oscar Schisgall

A cowboy is inspired by a book to handle a six-gun situation.

SOME of the boys on the Corkscrew T said that the old cracked shaving mirror had been hanging outside the bunkhouse winter and summer ever since Goldy Magid nailed it there in '96. Maybe they exaggerated; maybe not. Certainly, however, this was the first time in its long existence that the glass had saved a man's life.

If Bulldog Kayne hadn't been bending before it, scraping off a three days' sprout of brown stubble, he would never have seen the long six-shooter that was lifted behind him.

The little mirror revealed the sight not too clearly, but still effectively. Bulldog saw the distorted reflection of the man and saw the weapon suddenly levelled. Instantly he dodged—and the gun roared.

He acted so quickly that the roar of the six-shooter stunned the hot afternoon silence even before the falling razor struck the ground. And the shaving mirror—which had so long prevented many a leathery face from looking like dirty cowhide—was smashed to flying bits.

At the moment Bulldog was unarmed. His own gun had been left dangling in its holster over his cot. So, with a wild squirm and a heave of his lean body, he lunged from the ground into the open door of the bunkhouse. Another bullet cut splinters out of the floor from under his vanishing heel.

"Thunderin' catfish!" he gasped as he scrambled to his feet. "This war is sudden!"

With more speed than grace he seized his gun and whirled around toward the entrance. He expected to see the shooter appear there, ready to launch a third bullet. And though, in his amazement, he didn't understand the cause of all the excitement, Bulldog was prepared to return lead for lead.

Two wild seconds he waited, but no one came. And so he sprang back to the door himself, his trigger finger tense and hard. But what he saw simply increased the mystery of the unexpected attack.

Beyond the corral the man was galloping off madly, furiously, on a raging horse that was a black slash in a cloud of dust.

"The doggone yellow-livered coyote!" roared Bulldog Kayne and forthwith sent four shots whizzing after the man. They were useless. One cracked against the corral fence; the rest sailed harmlessly on in the general direction of California. He was regarded as a good shot, ordinarily, but now his target was more than a hundred yards away and racing crazily toward the mountains.

Bulldog dashed out toward the corral. He had the notion of yanking out a pony, leaping to his bare back, and changing away in pursuit. He had scarcely reached the fence, however, when he dropped the idea.

"The doggone critter has too big a start!" he panted, as if telling the news to the startled horses. "Gee, ain't that a dirty way o' putting up a fight, though?"

Half of his long face still white with blobs of shaving lather, Bulldog glared after the departing billow of dust. He was hardly aware of Mrs. Purdy, the Old Man's wife, who had rushed out to the porch of the ranch house. She was a short woman and stocky, with hair as white as summer clouds; and her spirit was indicated by the fact that she had emerged from the door with a rifle.

"Who is he, Bulldog?" she called, her own narrowed eyes fastened on the distant blur.

He turned with a start. "Hanged if I know, ma'am!" he shouted back. "He just dropped out o' nowhere, like, and blazed away!"

"Didn't you see his face?"

"Yeah, for just about one per cent of a quarter second, ma'am! I caught a look at it in the shavin' mirror. And then—whango! There was no mirror!" Again he peered toward the dust cloud. "I never seen that hombre before, but if I ever see him again—" Bulldog scowled. To the ponies in the corral more than to Mrs. Purdy, he added, "Any ornery snake that'll shoot at a feller's back and then wriggle away from a man-to-man fight don't deserve even time to explain—no, sir! He's lower than a worm's heel."

He moved back toward the bunkhouse, his gun swinging from his hand. And because he had to pass close to Mrs. Purdy, he wiped the drying lather from his brown cheek. As he approached her, she demanded:

"If you don't know him, what reason's he got to shoot at you?"

"He didn't hang around long enough to say," Bulldog answered. He even managed a faint grin. "Mebbe he just took a dislike to me in passin' sort of. Some folks acts awful quick on their grudges."

"H'm!" snapped Mrs. Purdy, her eyes still following the far-off smudge of dust. "Soon as you're through cutting off the rest of that beard, Bulldog, you better run down to the valley and tell Mr. Purdy about it."

"Yes'm," he promised and continued to the bunkhouse. Most of the hands of the Corkscrew T were down in Greenslope Valley with the Old Man, else there might have been a more enthusiastic gathering to greet the stranger who had so dramatically chanced upon the ranch. With the cook, Li Mug Nu, who was holding an astounded head out of the kitchen door, Bulldog Kayne had been the only cow-waddie left behind.

The rest of his shave, accomplished in front of a small triangle of glass rescued from the fragments on the ground, was far from satisfactory.

"I reckon my cheeks'll be about as smooth as young cactus," he muttered as he worked. And this, of all times, was the occasion on which Bulldog Kayne needed smooth cheeks.

It was Saturday afternoon. The fol-

lowing day Stella Chisholm would be exactly twenty-one years old, and Bulldog had promised to ride over to Bristol, fifty-seven miles due west, to help Stella celebrate. More than two weeks ago he had spoken to Old Man Purdy about this birthday expedition; and the Old Man, hiding a soft spot somewhere under his elephant skin, had replied:

"Yuh get offen my ranch Sat'dy afternoon, Bulldog, an' if I catch yuh back before Monday, so help me I'll have yuh branded with the crookedest T yuh ever laid eyes on! Got any present bought or d'yuh need some cash?"

That was one of the reasons Old Man Purdy's boys clung to him like a bunch of kids around their dad: he had a heart.

Of course, Bulldog had long since bought the present. As he rode off from the Corkscrew T this afternoon, he carried it under his arm—a narrow but very thick book. On his sorrel cayuse, he looked cleaner than he had appeared in a month. His sun-browned cheeks shone after the recent shave, and his Stetson lacked its usual coating of dust.

Suddenly, when he was scarcely half way to Greenslope Valley, Bulldog ejaculated, "Thunderin' catfish!" He spoke so abruptly that his pony started, pricked up its ears. "Just keep a-goin' easy, Sunstroke," he said. "I got an idea which yuh won't understand even if yuh listen."

It was, in truth, a startling idea. Bulldog believed he knew now why the stranger had shot him. It must be because of the shirt he was wearing.

Yes, that was it—the shirt. And a very gay shirt it was, bravely checkered with brilliant blue and yellow squares. Actually, it wasn't his own. For this birthday trip he had borrowed it from Slim Hannibal, who wore it only on holidays. In all Marshall County, Slim had asserted, it was the only one of its kind—to which the rest of the boys had answered, "Which is danged lucky for this here County."

"Yep," Bulldog reflected as he urged the cayuse on, "I'll bet seven months' pay the ornery toad figgered I was Slim Hannibal. Seein' me from the back—well, reckon we better talk to Slim."

He sent the pony on at a quick trot, moving directly toward the blazing red sun that rolled over the purple mountains far to the west. On the crest of a low hill just above Greenslope Valley, Bulldog stopped to squint over Old Man Purdy's vast sea of cattle.

It swayed in a brown, heaving mass. Here and there he could distinguish a few of the boys riding either alone or in small groups. And presently he recognized the Old Man himself, accompanied by Slim Hannibal and two other hands.

Bulldog went down to them. He waved as they halted; and when he reached them, he said:

"Slim, a feller just tried to put a bullet through yuhr head. He missed yuh by about the width of a bee's buzz and he plumb busted our shavin' mirror."

Slim stared. After a while he stared at the Old Man, too. Then a slow grin spread over his bony face.

"Yeah," he said. "Also my aunt in Idaho just kissed me on the neck and handed me a stick o' dynamite which blew up the capitol o' Nevada. What is it, Bulldog—the sun or bad licker?"

"I ain't kiddin'," insisted Bulldog Kayne as he explained what had happened in front of the bunkhouse.

As he spoke, the Old Man tugged thoughtfully at his bulging gray mustache. He started a frown which soon developed into a scowl. And Slim Hannibal meanwhile rounded his eyes to astounded circles.

"By jumpin' weasels!" he exclaimed when Bulldog had finished. "I'll lay a hundred to one it was either Dutch Kester or one o' his gang!"

"Dutch tryin' to get yuh?"

"So he said the time I ruined his hold-up party over on the Cinder Center trail."

The Old Man interrupted: "Just what happened that time, Slim?" His voice was deep and rumbling, like the sound of distant thunder.

Slim told him. "Aw," he said, "that yellow-spined Dutch was holdin' up some ol' geezer who was ridin' into Cinder Center. The old feller didn't have much, but seems like Dutch wasn't any too particular. He was just havin' his own way when I come along the trail. Nacherly, I pulled my lead-spitter an' got goin'. Dutch turned toward me, which gave the old geezer a chance to pull a gun out o' someplace. There was fireworks for a while, but Dutch got away plumb whole—though I'll be hanged if I know how he did it. He yelled as he started ridin' away that some day he'd get me for that. I chased him a ways, but he sort o' lost himself in the hills. Reckon he came to get me to-day, seein' as he didn't find many hangin' around the ranch house."

"An' yuh were wearin' yuhr good shirt that day?" Bulldog asked.

"Yeah. I was ridin' in to the dance at Rooney's. Sorry yuh almost got punctured on my account, Bulldog." He eyed the checkered shirt fondly. "Hope she don't bring yuh more hard luck."

"She ain't brought me any yet," said Bulldog. "I'll just be keepin' my eyes open as I ride in her, that's all."

He prepared to move on, but Old Man Purdy halted him with a wave of his calloused hand. The ranch owner spoke slowly, uncertainly:

"Bulldog, mebbe it won't be so healthy for yuh to ride into Bristol alone."

"Why not?"

"The way I figure it—" the Old Man peered toward the blinding sun "—it's out there somewhere, in them hills, that Dutch Kester an' his pards hang out."

"Yeah," admitted Bulldog. "Reckon yuh're right. All the same, I got a birthday party to go to."

The Old Man looked very grim. He talked more slowly than ever. "Bulldog, mebbe deliverin' a book ain't worth riskin' a life."

"But this," answered the lean cowhand, "is a very special sort o' book. It's called 'Creative Imagination' an' it's sure the kind o' learnin' Stella Chisolm likes to read. I'm kind o' set on gettin' it to her in time."

"H'm—mebbe—" Old Man Purdy hesitated. "Mebbe it'd be sort o' wise to change yuhr shirt 'fore yuh leave—"

At that Bulldog Kayne stared in surprise that was not without a touch of pain.

"Thunderin' catfish!" he cried. "Change my shirt for a doggone ornery coyote what ain't got the nerve to face a man? I'll go naked first! No, sirree! I'm a-goin' as I stand an' if Dutch Kester don't like my looks, let him come out an' say so! Let's go, Sunstroke. Yip!"

And Bulldog Kayne, with his book under his arm and his gun at his side, went riding westward. There was a queer smile on his thin lips as he watched the blazing sun sink into the jumble of mountains.

He had, of course, planned his visit to Bristol in a way which would allow him the most time in the company of Stella Chisolm. By riding until ten o'clock at night, he calculated, he could cover half the distance to the town. Then he'd camp and resume his journey at dawn, reaching the Chisolm place between eight and nine in the morning—possibly in time for a late Sunday breakfast.

"An' I'll prob'ly use the same system coming home," he had told the Old Man. "No use wastin' daylight."

Accordingly, at ten o'clock Bulldog stopped, tethered his unsaddled horse in a patch of grass, and built himself a little fire. Since leaving the Corkscrew T he had traveled almost thirty miles, and he was hungry enough to devour the entire contents of his saddle pack at one meal.

He had halted near a brook in a small, circular valley around which

loomed a series of low and rocky ridges. Out of the very center of the basin welled a mound, brush-covered and perhaps fifty feet high, whose top was crowned with rocks. Peering up at the stones, Bulldog—who had been reading the book he was carrying to Bristol—reflected.

"Looks like a sort o' castle up there, with all them rocks juttin' against the sky. Or maybe a big, stone nest." Then he grinned. That was what happened to a man if he tried to read "Creative Imagination."

While the red glow of leaping, dancing flames illumined his long face, Bulldog squatted comfortably and ate his meal and pondered upon the awesome vastness of a universe which could hold so many stars. It was doggone hypnotizin', once yuh got to thinkin' about the size o' them glimmerin' heavens; sort o' made yuh feel like a speck o' plumb nothingness sittin' right in the middle o' everything; made yuh feel awful small an' awful big at the same time. First yuh felt like mebbe that whole Bigness could settle down on yuh an' kind o' snuff yuh out proper; an' the next minute yuh got the idea that, by jumpin' scorpions, yuh owned the whole danged space! Yes, sirree, yuh could sit there like a king, an' the whole shootin'-match, stars an' skies an' hills an' all, was yuhr'n! Funny, bein' out alone at night like this. . . .

There was no moon. Despite the sparkle of those myriad stars, the night was black. Bulldog smoked a friendly cigarette while he gazed about into the cool, hushed skies; and presently he decided it was time to douse the fire and sleep.

He stretched his long legs and yawned. He threw the cigarette stub into the flames. Slowly, almost lazily, he rose.

And then, as he was standing in the flare of the fire, he suddenly detected a faint sound that made him turn suspiciously, while his hand curled about the butt of his gun.

He squinted through the darkness with hard, narrowed eyes. Had it been the cayuse, stumbling against a stone? It was difficult to see distinctly. Yet in a moment he discerned something that swiftly brought the six-shooter out of its holster.

Up there, on one of the ridges, four bulky silhouettes had appeared.

They were as motionless as stones. They stood regarding him and the flames. Still far enough away to threaten no immediate danger, they nevertheless filled Bulldog Kayne with a strange sense of menace. If they intended to be peaceable, why in thunder didn't they come ahead and say so? Why were they standing up there like four black ghosts, watching him?

Bulldog called something—a question and a challenge. The answer he received was curt and final: the crack of a gun, the plunk of a bullet somewhere to his left.

"Thunderin' catfish!" he whispered. "Reckon I ain't a-goin' to get much sleep at that."

He realized then that he was in the firelight, an illumined target; and also that his vividly checkered shirt was probably visible to those four figures on the ridge.

He jumped out of the glowing circle as another shot cracked through the stillness. Quickly he peered around. "If this is goin' to be a four-to-one fight, reckon I'd better get me a bit o' shelter," he decided. And he saw a stronghold immediately, the crown of rocks on the crest of the mound!

"Made t'order!" he exulted as he raced up the brush-carpeted slope. Something buzzed above him. Bulldog reached the top, vaulted a border, and found himself crouching in a veritable little fortress. Jagged rocks of all sizes surrounded him, cupped him in a space no wider than four feet. "Snug as a bird in a nest!" he told himself.

Raising his head above the wall of stone, Bulldog saw that the men on the ridge were now running down toward

the fire; doubtless they expected to continue straight up the side of the mound.

"Easy, fellers!" he yelled to them. "We ain't properly interduced yet, an' I don't aim to entertain strangers up here! What's yuhr game?"

And now a deep voice shouted back: "I promised I'd git yuh, Checker-shirt! An' I'm gonna git yuh now!"

"That so?" Bulldog levelled his gun. "All right, Dutch, come ahead an' do yuhr gettin'. But I'm warnin' yuh to keep off this hill. I aim to keep it right private."

Bulldog's gun roared into the night. None of those four men fell, however, and he muttered a soft oath. "Better hang on to my fire till they gets closer," he thought.

He knew now that his assailants were the Dutch Kester gang—a rowdy crowd recruited from the dregs of life for whatever purpose convenience might suggest. They had been roaming these hills for several weeks, according to reports; and their work had been confined to robbing outfits and money from anyone who chanced to pass within their sight.

Probably the glow of Bulldog's fire had attracted them; they had come like moths toward a flame—to see the checkered shirt. Dutch would not be content merely to steal the outfit. He would be satisfied only with the vengeance he owed Slim Hannibal.

With an uneasy scowl Bulldog Kayne saw that the four men, still some distance away, were scattering. Obviously they planned to attack the mound from four sides.

"Wish I was twins an' had four guns," Bulldog muttered. It occurred to him that he might save himself a fight for his life by yelling the truth about the borrowed shirt, by letting his outfit be stolen. "But I'll be a doggone ornery yellow-bellied son-of-a-bull 'fore I'll do anythin' like that! No, sirree! Let 'em come an' get me—if they can!"

And to emphasize his decision, he sent a bullet whizzing into the darkness. At once four cracks against the stones about him replied.

"Huh! They ain't such terrible shots, these toads!"

Suddenly Dutch Kester's voice shouted something. And then—the excitement began.

From all sides, it seemed, thunder burst into the night. The little rocky fortress resounded with the patter of bullets. Swift insects hummed and whistled over Bulldog Kayne's head. He tensed himself, peered out between rocks, jammed the barrel of his six-gun through crevices, and answered.

But, to his amazement, he could see no one!

"The blisterin', yellow-backed snakes!" he gasped. "So they're tryin' to perforate me 'fore they dast run up the hill, hey? All right, gents!" he yelled. "Hide behind yuhr rocks! The first head that pops gets punctured!"

He had guessed their intentions exactly. Dutch Kester and his three companions were sprawling behind stones below the mound—each man guarding one side of the lofty fortress. Evidently they saw that to attempt a direct charge would be disastrous: rushing up the brushy slope to a height of fifty feet would leave them uncovered, easy targets. And none of them, seemingly, cared to expose himself to Bulldog's fire.

It was safer and just as easy to maintain a steady warfare until some lucky bullet found the man atop the hill. Then they could proceed without fear.

They started a steady fusillade of bullets, so that the round valley reverberated with the unending thunder of shots.

Bulldog Kayne, crouching in his shelter, was, for a while, overcome with a driving rage. Lead hissed over his head, clattered against the rocks about him—and he seldom could see any of his assailants. It was like fighting the darkness itself. Like shooting into a black wall. Like blazing away at phantoms.

His six-gun roared time after time, spitting bullets toward the spots where the men seemed to be hiding. He knew he hadn't hit anybody. He might just as well aim at the stars. From four sides the shower of lead continued.

"If only I can hold out till dawn!" he muttered. "If only I could get a look at them devils!" Thrusting his gun through a crevice, he fired two quick shots toward a little spurt of red flame. He was about to discharge a third when something plunking very close to him bit a stinging slash across his shoulder.

"Damn!" He choked the word. His fingers sprang up to the wound. It wasn't very serious, he knew. A rebounding bullet had cut a shallow gash. It was bleeding, and it angered more than it pained.

Bulldog emptied his gun in fury. He reloaded—he'd been doing it rapidly, time after time—and sent three more shots into the blackness before his rage cleared sufficiently to reveal an appalling fact.

He had only three bullets left!

Three bullets in his gun—and four men around the mound!

"Well, I'll be blasted!" he gasped. "Here's me blazin' away like mad, an'—an'—"

He gaped down at his cartridge belt, explored it with swift fingers. It was empty. Whatever ammunition he still had was in the barrel of his gun: enough for three shots.

Bulldog Kayne, scowling, squatted motionless. He stared at the six-shooter. He listened to the hum of lead over his head, to its patter on his shelter. Those four men hadn't yet dared to rush up the slope.

"If only I could get a decent aim—only for a minute!" he mumbled to himself. "If I could make those lizards show their heads! Three good shots 'd leave me with only one rat to fight—and that mightn't be so doggone awful terrible—"

He considered. And of a sudden his clouded eyes became brilliant specks of inspiration. Something like a grin—very grim, however—twisted his lips.

He waited a few seconds. Another volley of shots rattled on the stones.

And in the very midst of them Bulldog Kayne emitted a frightful scream of pain—a screech that raced down to a gurgled groan and then, after a choked "O-o-oh!" subsided to silence.

"Got him!" triumphantly shouted the voice of Dutch Kester. "Got him clean!"

Up among his rocks, Bulldog waited.

The grim twist hadn't dropped from his tight mouth. "I should 'a' thought o' this long ago," he thought. "Now watch them coyotes come scootin' up the hill!"

Peering out through crevices, he saw them. Whipped by victory, they were scrambling to the brush-covered slopes—at last revealed. They yelled as they came, boisterously and with laughs.

Poised, Bulldog waited until they had started up the slope. He wanted clear aim. And he got it.

To the stupefaction of the four men, shots suddenly roared from the rocky fortress.

Bulldog saw his first victim throw up his arms, collapse, and roll down the hill in a crazy huddle. The second, an instant later, dropped to his chest and lay motionless.

He turned toward the third side. But now he saw nobody.

"Freeze the blasted luck!" he ejaculated, his eyes flaming. "They ducked too quick!"

He waited, quivering with excitement, for a glimpse of someone else. The remaining two men, however, had found time to sink flat into the brush. Probably they were already squirming and crawling back to the bottom of the hill, to the rocks. In the blackness, Bulldog could see no trace of them.

After a few seconds he snapped, "An' what now? Here I am with one bullet an' two to get! Thunderin' catfish, what now?"

Several minutes of absolute silence gripped the valley. And then again

shots came—from only two directions now. The survivors had regained the protection of the rocks!

But in those minutes of stillness Bulldog had been far from idle. Spurred by a new idea, he had stripped off his vest, the checkered shirt and his holiday pants. With one bullet left to fight two men, he needed strategy!

In front of him and to his right, the guns continued to crack. Behind him, however, and to his left, lay two men who had been eliminated. And near those two must be other guns—and bullets—

"I got to reach one of 'em," Bulldog reasoned. "If I can get hold of a new shootin'-iron and mebbe a few rounds o' lead, things won't be so bad. Only I can't hop out o' this nest without them lizards spottin' me an' mebbe borin' me complete. They got to be made to look somewheres else for a second or two—yep, that's what."

So he groped around in his stony nest until he found one round rock as big as a pail. He dislodged it easily enough and buttoned the checkered shirt around it. To one end of it he strapped his trousers, then grinned in satisfaction.

Crouching in his underwear—which was stained darkly over his left shoulder—Bulldog heaved the stone to the top of a sheltering rock.

Immediately the bulk attracted a renewed volley of shots. He pushed it violently, and it toppled over to the hill, went rolling down cumbersomely. In the blackness that shirt, trailed by the legs of the pants, looked like a man bumping helplessly down to death!

Bulldog heard yells, more shots. He knew that the two remaining assailants were watching the downward plunge of his clothes; their eyes must be away from the little fortress!

He took the chance.

Bounding out, he rushed down the back of the hill.

The trick succeeded. They hadn't seen him leave his nest! Like a phantom in his white underwear, Bulldog Kayne — gripping his six-shooter — lunged through the scratching, tearing brush. He couldn't be seen now, he knew; the hill intervened between him and the two men.

At the bottom of the slope, near a sprawling figure, he found a six-gun whose barrel still held five cartridges. Bulldog snatched it up exultantly. He even tarried long enough to unhook the belt of the inanimate huddle and to strap it around his own lean, thinly clad hips. It was a gaudy Mexican thing, but it contained several rounds of ammunition.

Bending low, Bulldog had just turned away from the still body and was wriggling through the brush, when a voice on the opposite side of the hill ejaculated:

"Holy canyons, Dutch! This ain't nothin' but a rock!"

"A—*what?*" the other man cried incredulously.

"A rock, I'm tellin' yuh! He's got his shirt an' pants on it. What in hell's the hyena up to now?"

"Lay low!" ordered Dutch Kester. "I wanna have a look-see at that. Keep yuhr danged head down, Pete."

A minute later the two men were stooped over the stone that had hurtled down the hill from the stronghold. Dutch Kester, big of face and tremendous in figure, cursed his astonishment. Because the clothes had been borne into the midst of a thicket, Dutch had little fear of being easily discerned from the hilltop. Yet he squinted up at the crown of rocks very uncertainly, suspiciously.

"Somethin' wrong, Pete," he whispered. "He's got somethin' up his sleeve. He—"

So much Dutch had said when a biting voice, directly behind him, snapped: "Yuh're darned tootin' I got somethin' up my sleeve! Drop yuhr guns and reach for clouds! Pronto!"

It came so unexpectedly that both men, stunned, whirled around to gape in round-eyed bewilderment.

They saw a long, lean, white figure looming beyond the clump of brush. He had crawled there cautiously and now, that he was standing, there was a ridiculous air about him in his underwear. But there was nothing ridiculous in the two six-shooters directed at the dumfounded pair.

"Drop 'em, I said!"

For an instant they had been too astounded to obey. Now Dutch Kester—who considered discretion the better part of valor—allowed his gun to slip from his fingers and raised both his huge arms above his head.

But Pete—a thin, wiry little man—found sudden hope in the darkness. Instead of releasing his gun, he snapped it up toward Bulldog. He was about to squeeze the trigger when one of Bulldog's six-guns spat a spurt of red flame.

As the shot echoed among the ridges, Pete groaned and sank in a limp huddle—a bullet groove having neatly parted his hair in the very center of his head.

"When he comes to," said Bulldog Kayne, "mebbe he'll learn to respect a six-shooter as much as yuh does yuhrself, Dutch. Well, reckon the war's about over, hey?"

They stood eyeing each other across the clump of brush—Bulldog's eyes narrow, Dutch's glaring and blazing. And they were still standing like that when Bulldog's head was jerked up suddenly.

He listened. For a few seconds the universe of darkness and stars seemed to contain but one sound—the thumps of approaching horses!

From somewhere far off a faint voice shouted, "The shots came from up yonder, I'm tellin' yuh! Head for that there ridge!"

And as he heard the yell, Bulldog sensed a trickle of joy course through his whole body. His eyes abruptly shone.

"Thunderin' catfish!" he whispered to himself. "It's Slim Hannibal! Oh, wait'll he sees his shirt!"

THEY arrived within five minutes—a whole crowd of the boys from the Corkscrew T, headed by Old Man Purdy himself.

"By thunder!" roared the Old Man as he bounded from his rearing horse. "What in tarnation's been happenin' here?"

"An' where," shouted Slim Hannibal, sliding from his saddle, "where in hell's my shirt?"

For a while the confusion of horses and men dashing to a stop was so great, their hubbub so deafening, that Bulldog could answer nothing. After a time, however, he managed to squeeze in a few words of explanation. While he spoke, a few of the boys tied Kester's hands behind him and others bent over the figure of Pete. Two more went in quest of those members of the gang sprawling on the far side of the hill.

Old Man Purdy waited until Bulldog had finished. Then he shook his big head and snapped:

"My ol' woman was right, by jiminy! She says to me yuh'd be sure to get in trouble an' she bawls me out somethin' terrific for lettin' yuh go roaming off alone, Bulldog. I tried to tell her yuh could take danged good care o' yuhrself, but she says no, I ought to look after yuh. An' she keeps on after me all through supper and later, too, till I just natcherly had to call in the boys an' start out huntin' to see who'd killed yuh, Bulldog—or who yuh'd killled yuhrself. Then we— Why, man, what's the matter?"

He suddenly checked himself because Bulldog Kayne's features had assumed an expression of unspeakable sadness and dismay. He was actually biting his lip.

"Does yuhr wound hurt?" the Old Man demanded.

"Naw," muttered Bulldog softly, "naw, it—it ain't that—"

"What is it, then?"

"I—I—" An instant Bulldog hesitated; then, while everybody listened in breathless amazement, he cried:

"Sufferin' snakes, boss, I'm due in Bristol to-morrow mornin', and look at me! No clothes! The shirt an' pants are worse'n rags after their downhill ride through the brush! Besides, the shirt's all stained red! What in the name o' thunderin' catfish am I gonna do? I got the book all nicely packed up among them rocks, an' I promised Stella Chisolm I'd be there early in the mornin'. An'—gee, a feller can't go to a birthday party in his underwear! How 'm I gonna tote the book to her?"

The Old Man stared. And, of a sudden, a chuckle rumbled out of the depths of his stomach.

"Bulldog," he said, "why didn't yuh lemme finish what I was sayin'? I did as my wife advised, see? Got the boys together an' was about to start off. An' what happens? Why, we get a telegram telephoned in from Cinder Center. An' it's a message for Mr. Bulldog Kayne."

Bulldog blinked. "For *me*, Boss, did yuh say?"

"Yep. From Stella Chisolm. An', best as I remember it, the words was: 'Due to mother's illness birthday celebration postponed until next Sunday.'" Again the Old Man chuckled. "Better come home, Bulldog, an' give yuhr shoulder a chance to heal. Yuh can tote yuhr book over to Bristol next week. Reckon the goin' 'll be safer then, too, now that these hills are cleared o' ornery yeller lizards!"

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THE RIVER GANG

By Frank Hadley

Ranger bullets blaze a death trail through an ambuscade.

PABLO VASCO, Border outlaw and smuggler, entered the Alcazar, Kean Lacey's combination saloon, dance hall and gambling house, and paused just within. The outlaw's beady eyes, flickering over the smoke-hazy barroom, failed to identify a lanky figure bending over a card table. With the ever-recurring dread of a long arm reaching out for him, Pablo padded like some great jungle cat across the floor directly toward the stranger. His right hand hung at the opened bosom of his shirt and his fingers brushed the polished butt of a short-barreled Colt six-shooter.

That sixth sense, which is nothing more than perfect coordination of mind and muscle and a sensitive balance of the nervous system, warned Stray Waddell, young Texas Ranger, of danger. One pantherish movement hurled the card table forward and brought his six feet of body tensely erect. His black eyes recognized Pablo and saw the forthcoming ejaculation, "El Rangero," form on the thick lips as Pablo drew his gun.

Triggerless Colts leaped to Stray's hands. A lean thumb whipped a polished hammer two lightning strokes. Roaring gashes of flame lashed out. A brace of slugs crushed the cry on Pablo's lips into a death gurgle before his own gun had been fired.

Thin wisps of gun smoke eddied among the rough-hewn rafters of the Alcazar. The rattle of the wheezy piano ended in a vibrating crash. Over and over one of the girls in the place whimpered, *"Madre de Dios! Madre de Dios!"* Kean Lacey froze to immobility behind the bar; his hands elevated, and his eyes staring at the sinister figure crouched beyond the overturned card table.

The ranger's black eyes burned holes in the faces of the outlaw pack in the saloon and held them spellbound. A jumble of thoughts raced through his mind: "Hell of a jam, this. Just when I was gittin' a good look at Jack Briel and Mex Chico. No chance now to

wait and trail 'em to their hide-out."

A wolfish grin twisted his lean, brown face. His thumbs whipped the polished hammers again. Two shots jammed into the puncheon floor and hurled a shower of splinters into the very teeth of the outlaw gang and drove them backward. Stray's thin lips spat words that bit like the lash of a whip: "Back, yuh rannies! Back agin the wall or git yuhr bellies shoved intuh yuhr backbones by hot lead!"

He hesitated momentarily. A shuffling of feet, glowering looks, and mumbled curses indicated the attitude of the outlaws. Pablo must have been popular. A happy thought suddenly struck Stray as he racked his brain for a way to end this fracas. "I'll change these devils' minds for 'em. Here's a chance to put myself in plumb good and make 'em think I'm their breed. May meet some of 'em later."

"You, there!" he snarled, snapping a shot at Kean Lacey. "Come outa behind that bar and git in line. Face the wall! *Pronto!* You other rannies, this ain't yuhr funeral; I'm wantin' the house bankroll!"

Hoarse growls and a noticeable letdown in the tension greeted those words and showed the approval of the hangers-on at the Alcazar. But a snarl twisted the face of Mex Chico and his long body tensed as he shot a furtive glance around the barroom. Jack Briel's slitted mouth grinned wickedly and his slate-colored eyes weighed this daring bandit.

In a smooth-flowing glide Stray reached the end of the bar. He slid his left Colt in its holster, thrust out a long arm, and swept the contents of the cash register into an overall pocket. Three steps carried him to the gambling tables, which he looted. The Alcazar would bank no more games that night.

"Hell will be to pay over this," thought Stray grimly. "Captain Mahaney will shore have to do some squarin'-up."

With a lightninglike movement he filled his left hand with a Colt. Thumbs fanned back hammers in warning clicks as he cat-footed to the front door. He paused on its threshold. His laugh rasped on the barroom like the bite of a file. "I'm driftin', you rannies. Any what follows is plumb shore to git a slug in his gizzard! *Adios, amigos mios!*" With tigerish grace he slid through the doorway. Mockingly he called back over his shoulder, "*Hasta luego*—till we meet!"

His shrill whistle brought Carbine, a raw-boned, blood-red bay, lunging to his side. A loud snort; then hoofs drummed a fierce tune against hard-packed ground. The nervy bandit was gone, riding like the wind toward the Rio Grande.

AN hour later Carbine stopped on the north bank of the Rio. Stray twisted up a cigarette and slouched in his saddle while he reviewed the events that had led up to his fight in the Alcazar. He had been sent up the river by Captain Mahaney of the Rangers to do undercover work for Major Lem Coudray, district chief of the Border Service. Red Caskey, his partner, had been ordered to scout around Villaseca, a town on the south side of the Rio Grande. The two rangers were out to locate a murderous band of dope and whiskey smugglers known as the River Gang, that had been causing a reign of terror among Border officers. Who were members of the desperate band, and where they had their headquarters was unknown.

After days of scouting, Stray had learned that Jack Briel and Mex Chico belonged to the gang. In order that he might know them and later trail them to their hangout, Stray had followed Briel and Chico into the Alcazar, a notorious outlaw saloon, run by Kean Lacey who himself was an undercover man for Lem Coudray. But the unfortunate meeting with Pablo Vasco had caused Stray's plans to go wrong.

Now he was in a quandary; he could not remain in that vicinity, for Kean

Lacey did not know what part he was playing and would send officers after him, which meant that Stray's usefulness on that side of the river was temporarily over. So after counting the money he had taken from the Alcazar, he wrapped it in a handkerchief, jumped to the ground, and hid the bundle under a rock where it would be safe until it could be returned to its owner. Mounting, he gathered up the reins and looked across to the south shore of the Rio.

Then it was that he heard the clop-clop of hoofs. His Winchester slithered from its boot; moonlight glinted on its blue barrel. With a pressure of his knees, he swung Carbine into the shadow of a huge boulder. Tensely alert, he cuddled the rifle in his arms and leaned forward, peering down the trail.

"Two hawsses," he muttered. "Ain't foggin' it much." He wet a forefinger and raised it in the air; a faint breeze was blowing up the trail toward him. "Don't reckon their broncs will wind us; so we'll wait and take a look-see."

Side by side two white objects bobbing up and down drew closer. A slight incline slowed the oncoming horses, and the mold of fallen leaves muffled the sound of striking hoofs. Saddle leather creaked; bridle irons jangled; mumbled words reached the ears of the waiting ranger. A steely laugh rang out and a sharp voice cut through the night. "That bird had guts to stick up them tough eggs in the Alcazar all by his lonesome. He musta got a wad of jack, too."

Stray stiffened at the sound of that voice; his thumb caressed the hammer of the Winchester and his forefinger snuggled around its trigger. Then he grinned. What luck! But once before had he heard that steely voice, yet he remembered it. It belonged to no other than Jack Briel.

"Yes-s," hissed a soft answer. "He ees queek with the gun and he shoot Pablo. *Por que*—for why? What we tell the beeg boss when he ask?"

"Tell him! Tell him Pablo was slow on the draw. Let Savella figure out the answer for himself."

Big boss! Savella! Chico the Mexican speaking. Savella, a notorious gangster for whom a world-wide search was then being made, was boss of the River Gang.

Here was luck, indeed. The very two men for a sight of whom Stray had dared recognition in entering the Alcazar were here before him. If their horses did not wind Carbine; if he could trail them across the Rio Grande and on to their hide-out. . . . Anyway, he had learned one thing: Tony Savella was chief of the River Gang.

Briel and Chico had stopped their horses. After a moment's conversation, Chico swung out of his saddle and walked to the edge of the water. He lighted matches and studied the ground. Then he returned and spoke in low tones. Stray heard Briel's reply. "Someone rode this way since dark, eh? Mighta been that bird who bumped off Pablo. He got plenty of dough out of the Alcazar and is probably headed across the Rio to blow it in."

"Yes-s," hissed Chico. His teeth clicked and he spat out the words: "Me, I want to meet that hombre. Thees knife weel make heem pay for Pablo's death!"

Stray grinned as he heard those words; his right arm flexed. A vision of Diego Farrias, a peerless swordsman and knife wielder, came to his mind, and he saw himself standing before Diego receiving instruction in the art of handling a knife. Chico would meet worthy steel when he attempted to avenge Pablo's death.

Briel laughed shortly. "Look out he don't see you first. That bird's fast with a smoke wagon."

The Mexican snarled a string of curses; then he grunted, "*Vamosnos*—let's go!"

Stray could still hear Briel's steely laugh and Chico's snarling curses as the pair urged their horses into the

water. His keen eyes followed them until they faded among the shadows that gloomed the opposite shore. With a grim laugh he swung astride Carbine. "I reckon that Chico is a curly wolf honin' fer my blood. He about figgered me fer a John Law. Can happen. They's one way to find out, and that's follow his trail. Git goin' red hawss."

Carbine angled across the Rio toward the towering cliff that loomed darkly on the sky, and then up a shelving bench into a gloomy cleft. Upon entering the cleft inky blackness swallowed them and a bend blotted out the back trail. It was an ideal spot for an ambuscade. Stray slid to the ground and holding to a stirup leather hugged Carbine's side as the bay labored up the steep, twisting trail. Higher and higher the crevice zigzagged and finally ran out on a level mesa covered with a thick growth of chaparral. There all sign of a trail was lost. Carbine wound in and out of narrow paths and dim runways; he did as Stray told him: "Follow yuhr nose, old-timer, we'll soon find a trail that leads to a town where we can stay the rest of the night. Then we'll come back in the morning and pick out them rannies' tracks."

It was long past midnight when Stray drew Carbine up on the crest of a ridge and looked down on a huddle of adobe shacks. The wings of a gentle breeze bore a faint thrumming of stringed music to his ears. A tinkly laugh floated through the night. The yelp of a frightened dog; the slam of a door; the receding clatter of a pony's hoofs—all were the usual sounds of a sleepy village.

That apparent peacefulness, however, did not lure Stray to ride boldly forward, even though the hour was late; that town, close to the Border, was altogether too quiet. So, ground-tying Carbine, he slipped down the trail to do a little scouting. Upon coming to a two-storied 'dobe building, evidently a saloon, he stopped and studied it closely. As his eyes made out the words "Perrogordo Cantina" painted on a lamplit window, he grinned. "Big Dog Saloon. The hombre what runs that joint musta been in the States. I'll take a look-see out back; may find a hawss or two."

He found no horses, nor try as he might could he see into the cantina. From within came the sound of music, the faint tinkle of glasses, and the drone of a monte dealer's voice.

Undoubtedly one could get food and drink in the Big Dog; probably lodging of a sort could also be had. What else might be in store for a stranger, especially should he be recognized as a ranger, remained to be seen. There was but one way to find out; so, drawing down the brim of his white Stetson, Stray stepped into the Perrogordo.

A burly, sullen-faced white man, presiding over the bar, greeted him with a sly grin and set out bottle and glass. Through hazy yellow lamplight Stray's eyes roved over the cantina. Evil eyes peered at him; among them were swart-skinned breeds, half caste Chinese, and renegade whites, the scum of the Border. Greed and lust glittered in the beady eyes that were quickly averted as the young ranger's gaze burned across the smoke shrouded room.

Stray grinned and holding a glass of liquor in his hand sauntered toward a monte game. The riffraff dregs of outlawry edged aside and gave free passage. A high play attracted his attention and he leaned closer to the table. Straightening, after bets were decided, he lifted the liquor to his lips just as a warning hiss stilled the room.

The word *"cuidado*—take care" vibrated in his ears. He drained his glass and let it crash on the floor as a door banged open at the far end of the saloon and four men slid into the Big Dog.

The newcomers hesitated in the doorway; their hard eyes raked the room as one focused on Stray. He knew none of them, but they were a type he was familiar with.

One, a pock-marked breed bore down

upon the young ranger. He was an ugly devil. His scarred face twisted in an evil grin and his thick hands brushed the wooden handles of a pair of low-swung six-shooters. By his side stalked a lean white man whose hawkish face was lighted with close-set, darty eyes, and whose long hands twitched over gun butts. Of the other two, Stray had but a glimpse; one was a hulking brute with gorillalike arms and a caved-in, flat nose; the other was a slender, yellow-faced thug dressed as a Mexican dandy.

Stark silence gripped the big, dirt-floored barroom, a silence broken by a question snarled at Stray: "You keel Pablo?"

The young ranger's body tensed; his lean hands quivered over the butts of triggerless Colts. Through his mind flashed the thought: "Looks like the River Gang done found me!" A wolfish snarl twisted his square-jawed face into a mirthless grin. His black eyes burned like balls of fire. He drawled slowly, "Yeah, I gunned him. What about it?"

Like the dart of a striking rattler's head the breed's hands struck at his sides. In a crash of thundering six-guns a bloody gunfight broke in the Big Dog. Jagged streaks of flame cut through the smoke-fogged barroom. Bullets screamed a tune of death. Hunks of lead thudded into walls, slapped tables, glanced, and whined off. Fighting time and dying time had arrived in the cantina. Men cursed. An agonized scream choked in a gurgle of blood.

Crouched, snarling like a grizzly brought to bay, Stray thumb-whipped his triggerless Colts in short, vicious strokes. Scarlet flame flowed from their muzzles as they jerked down in line and belched a stream of lead. The pock-marked breed, with a choked curse on his ugly mouth, died from a bullet that drilled into his right eye, ranged upward, and shattered the top of his head. A double roaring gash of fire splattered a shower of sparks across the belly of the renegade white.

Two heavy forty-five caliber slugs smashed him backward and hurled him among the card tables. The numbness of death griped his vitals as he clutched wildly at his stomach.

Bellowing like a maddened bull, Flatnose rocked forward, his reddish eyes gleaming with an insane light. Fair in his broad, hairy chest, a slug from Stray's right hand Colt crashed with a shock like that of a pile driver. Blood welled up from his punctured lungs and spewed from his thick lips. Like the bull he was, he tried to steady himself and raise his Colt. Balanced on nerveless feet, he teetered a moment, then spun about and flopped to his face, his crime-saturated life snatched from him as another bullet smashed into his body.

A searing gash of white-hot flame slit Stray's forehead and ripped loose a flapping strip of skin. A welter of blinding blood streamed into his eyes. From behind, a paralyzing blow drove him to his knees. Through a bloody haze he glimpsed the yellowish face of the slender outlaw and a poised, bloodless hand gripping a flaming Colt. Dancing grotesquely in the swirling gun smoke the mocking face of Jack Briel leered at Stray and just behind it the white teeth of Mex Chico clashed in a fiendish grin.

In a last mighty effort the young ranger staggered to his feet. Numbed hands tilted up his Colts. Weak thumbs held back their polished hammers. As the muzzles fanned down in line, thumbs released their hold. No rocking roar answered; no searing blasts followed; no hunks of lead smashed the evil grin from that yellow face; hammers clicked on empty shells. Wearily, with the brinish taste of his own blood in his mouth, the young ranger slumped in a heap.

A MONOTONOUS, hard drumming boomed slowly, insistently. A band of steel pressed on a throbbing brain. Heavy eyelids dragged apart

from glazed eyes. Agonizing darts of pain stabbed his feverish body as Stray Waddell opened his eyes and found himself in a low-ceilinged room through which slanted the rays of a late afternoon sun. Hot and stuffy, the room swarmed with flies that buzzed maddeningly and settled on his raw wounds. Every nerve in his body shrieked aloud; his skin was dry as a scaly snake, and his aching bones creaked like rusty hinges as he tried to move. But he was bound hand and foot.

His efforts wrung a groan from his bruised lips; a nauseating dizziness turned his body into a retching upheavel. Then he heard a rumble of voices and distinguished the words—words spoken in Mexican. "The gringo dog groans. It is the spirit of the dead talking!"

"Not so, Juan. This gringo is the devil himself. He is a great robber and fears not man nor God!"

"Yes, Manuel, he is a very devil and a great robber," replied Juan. "He killed Pablo and took from the Alcazar much gold, five thousand pesos, so said Chico."

"He had no money when he came to the Perrogordo, but—" Manuel sucked in his breath. "If we could find this gold—we would be very rich."

A door banged open; sunlight flooded the room, and then was blotted as a number of men filled the doorway.

"Manuel! Juan! Where are them *mozos?*" barked a sharp voice. "Has that guy come to his senses? No. Well, I'll wake him up."

The sound of footsteps approached Stray. He knew what was coming and tensed his bruised body. A heavy foot crashed against his ribs. A string of curses accompanied the kick. Stray could hardly restrain himself from answering in kind; but he kept his mouth closed and his eyes shut.

"Careful, Tony, don't bump him off. He's got the jack he took from the Alcazar hid somewhere. Musta been five thousand. Try dousing him with water; that'll bring him out of it."

Stray recognized the brittle steeliness in the tones of that voice. Jack Briel was speaking to Tony Savella, boss of the River Gang.

A deluge of cooling water splashed over Stray. It was a life saver. His feverish body soaked it up; his tortured muscles relaxed; his brain cleared, but he did not open his eyes. Again and again Manuel doused him, still Stray gave no sign of returning consciousness.

"Hell!" exploded Savella. "We haven't time to waste on him now. Damn him, he bumped off four of my men. I wish he was able to stand in front of me; I'd show him a few tricks with a gun."

"You promised me I could have him," hissed a soft voice. "He killed my brother Pablo."

"Sure, Chico, you can have him. But let him alone till we come back from across the river. I'd like to see you and him go about ten rounds with knives."

"If he handles a knife like he does them Colts of his, I wouldn't want to be in Chico's boots," chuckled Briel.

"We'll see to-morrow," snarled Savella. "Chico's got him pegged for an officer, and I'll swear he's got all the earmarks of one. He might have come prowlin' round here lookin' for that little red-headed devil we caught snoopin' yesterday. Or he may be one of them Border patrolmen over spyin' on us. Whoever he is he'll talk tomorrow before I'm done with him."

"You may be right, Tony, but he pulled off a sweet little job in the Alcazar; he acted like an old-timer to me."

"Makes no difference, Jack, I promised him to Chico. Besides he can't bump our men and get away with it. After we finish off those nosey officers the Border will be so hot that we'll have to lay low a few days. Then Chico can amuse us by showin' what he can do to this fellow with a knife."

"You got everything framed?"

"Sure. It's all cut and dried. I had a stool pigeon tell Lem Coudray that the Gang was going to run a shipment across to that old Stirrup Ranch at twelve to-night."

Briel chuckled. "I see," he said. "We'll be waiting for 'em."

"Yes, that's the frame. When the officers step out to make the pinch—blooie! We knock 'em off!"

"If they're on the spot, we give 'em the works, eh?"

"Sure, the whole works. All the mob except Chico will be on the job. He stays here and handles this end. We'll go across early and count noses at the ranch house so that everyone will know just what to do. We can't muff this job; those nosey officers are causing us too much trouble."

Savella gave a few more terse orders; then followed by his men he left the captive to the mercy of Juan and Manuel. Stray's heart had leaped when the smuggler spoke of a little redhead —could it be Red Caskey? Then when Savella told of how he planned a cold-blooded, wholesale slaughter of Border officers, the young ranger's blood boiled. Futilely he strained at his bonds, but the tough rawhide thongs bit into his flesh without loosening.

As the afternoon faded into dusk Stray racked his brain trying to think of a way to outwit the gang. He listened to Juan and Manuel argue about what Chico would do to him on the morrow.

"Chico will stake the gringo dog over an anthill," guessed Manuel.

"Not Chico, he's a bloodthirsty devil and will want to see gringo blood. He will slice him to ribbons with his knife."

Manuel shook his head and growled: "Too quick is that death, Juan. Chico will wrap him in a wet cowhide and let the sun dry it until it squeezes the life from the gringo, slowly, oh, so slowly."

"Not so, Chico will knife him," declared Juan, "and what a pity. The gringo has much gold hid away. Perhaps, if we—"

The pair lowered their voices. Stray could see their apprehensive glances cast over shoulders at the open door, and he tried to hear what was said. But the only words he could understand were "Chico" and "gold."

The money taken from the Alcazar! Could he use it to help him escape? A plan formed in his mind. By working on the greed of this pair he might escape in time to warn Lem Coudray of the ambush that had been planned for him.

A hoarse, drawn out moan rumbled in the depths of Stray's chest. He muttered an incoherent string of words, and then spoke distinctly, in Mexican: "Gold, much gold!" Through slitted eyelids he watched the effect on the two Mexicans. Juan's hand fell on Manuel's arm, and the pair leaned forward, their eyes glued to the moaning captive. Again came the drawn out moan and the words "gold, much gold."

On tiptoes Juan and Manuel approached and stood looking down at him. Stray continued to mutter.

"Get water," whispered Juan, bending over the moaning man. "We can't let him die—the gold."

Strong arms raised Stray's head and soft hands trickled water into his mouth. After a few moments his eyelids fluttered open. A pair of black, beady eyes regarded him anxiously, and a hiss escaped soft, red lips that parted to show gleaming teeth beneath a thin whisp of a mustache.

"Bring more water, Manuel."

Stray drank deeply. Then he looked up at Manuel. Twice the size of Juan, Manuel was as ferocious a looking bandit as Juan was a meek little one; yet Stray sensed that Juan was the leader. Both were ragged and barefooted; neither had visible arms except for a long knife stuck in Manuel's belt.

In a hoarse croaking voice Stray mumbled: "Food, I have much hunger."

After a moment's hesitation Manuel stepped into an adjoining room and re-

turned with a hunk of goat meat and a handful of tortillas. Juan loosened the captive's bonds. Flexing his arms Stray massaged his cramped muscles, and then wolfed the food. Juan rolled a corn-husk cigarette, lit it, and thrust it into Stray's mouth.

"A thousand thanks, gentlemen," murmured Stray, puffing on the cigarette. "Reward shall be yours. I'm a rich man, much gold have I."

Juan and Manuel visibly expanded. They squatted close to Stray and rolled cigarettes. "It is nothing," deprecated Juan in his smooth, soft voice. "To serve so great a bandit is an honor. But, señor, your gold you should have with you. Then, perhaps, you could save your life—" He shrugged his shoulders and looked shrewdly at the ranger.

"Save my life!" echoed Stray, puffing a cloud of smoke in the air. "Pouf! Just like that will my bravos charge down upon this place, kill all here, and rescue me."

Those words jarred Juan and Manuel out of their calm. With guilty starts they rose and looked apprehensively through the door into the night.

"Your bravos?" questioned Juan, again squatting before Stray.

"Certainly, little man!" exclaimed Stray, with a lofty wave of his hand. "I'm a great *bandido;* fifty bravos, great fighters all, follow me. When I fail to return—they come. Probably within the hour. But you, my friends, gave me food and cigarettes; for that, perhaps they may overlook you. Who knows?"

Juan and Manuel looked uneasily at each other; then drew apart and conversed in whispers. Again they squatted by Stray's side. Juan held another cigarette to the ranger's lips. "Señor," began the little bandit, and his voice shook, "we are very poor men—you have much gold. Perhaps it can be so arranged that we join your band. But—this Chico, he is *muy malo,* he is very quick with his knife, he—"

"Chico! Pouf! Like that he shall go down before me, me, the great *bandido!*" Stray puffed a cloud of smoke, waved his hands, and with a motion smooth as oil plucked the long knife from Manuel's belt.

The big Mexican's eyes bulged and his ferocious scowl turned to a sickly smile; a squeak of fright escaped Juan's soft, red lips. Both started back, gazing wildly at the doorway.

"Have no fear, *hombrecitos,*" growled Stray, with an inward chuckle, as he slashed the bonds binding his ankles. "You shall be my men, you shall become great *bandidos.* Then this Chico—"

A sibilant hiss spurred Juan and Manuel to panicky action. Stray lunged erect and stamped his half-numbed feet. As the blood raced down his legs sending a million tiny needles into his muscles, his eyes stabbed across the room and clashed with the malignant, murderous glare of Mex Chico.

Stray laughed, a mocking, acrid laugh that bit into Chico like etching fluid. Feet scuffled. Then with a frightened squeak, Juan scuttled to the door and followed by Manuel disappeared into the night. Chico cursed; his hate-filled eyes narrowed; his ugly mouth twisted into a snarl. His hand flashed to his waist and whipped a ten inch blade from his belt. Then with the tread of a great jungle killer cat he glided toward the young ranger.

"Gringo dog, you keel Pablo; for that I spill your guts on the floor!"

A smile curled Stray's lips, a smile belied flatly by his burning, black eyes. Bent forward at the waist, he balanced on springy feet. Chico, snarling, lunged in with a twisting, feinting movement to draw the ranger off balance. Grinning mirthlessly, Stray swayed his body, bent like a ballet dancer, and slipped aside.

Steel clashed on steel! Knives grated together up to hilts. The blades caught and hung. With all the power of his sinewy arm Stray bore down on Chico's blade; his wrist was the stronger.

Slowly the Mexican's knife point lowered. Sweat popped out on his swarthy face; his sharp, white teeth snapped like the fangs of a slashing wolf. His knife arm weakened under the relentless levering of the brawny ranger.

In desperation Chico tried a trick. The smallest fraction of an inch his knife point dropped suddenly; then like a flash it flicked up, to be met by a twisting lunge of an iron wrist that almost sent his knife spinning. A curse hissed from Chico's ugly mouth. Sidewise he wrenched his blade, freed it, and leaped backward before the swift onslaught of the implacable ranger. Weaving giddily, parrying, watching, the killer evaded the steel thirsting for his life's blood.

To the wall and back to the center of the room, Stray drove Chico. Sweat drenched their bodies; breath was wrung from their tortured lungs in great gasps. Chico lurched, appeared to stumble. Then as Stray hesitated he whirled and with a lightninglike thrust of his leg sent a heel crashing into Stray's knee. Had it not been for early training Stray would have been spitted on the Mexican's blade. As it was he lurched sidewise and sagged to the ground, his face constricted in agony.

Like a tawny killer cat, Chico whirled and drove in for the kill. White and grim, Stray flung forward and blocked the murderous drive of the swart-faced Mexican. Desperately he twisted, hacking at Chico's knife arm. A whine of agony was torn from the Mexican's snarling lips. Hacking, thrusting, ripping, Stray lunged into his foe. An avid, bloody face with hate-bitten eyes and twisted lips snarled at him. Flashing steel lashed out at him. A razor edge blade ripped through his arm from wrist to elbow.

More than Stray's life depended on this battle. He felt certain that Red Caskey was imprisoned somewhere within this nest of outlaws. And even now an ambush that would wipe out Lem Coudray and his Border officers was almost surely closing in on them.

A lurid stream of Mexican invective flowed from Chico's lips and ended in a snarl of triumph as Stray slipped in a pool of blood and slid to a knee. Like a slashing cougar Chico glided in to give the death stroke. His knife hissed downward and met a blue-steel blade as Stray struggled erect. The sweep of the Mexican's charge flung him inside the ranger's guard. A hate-filled, swart face leered an inch from Stray's. Steel clanged on steel. Desperately Stray stabbed. He felt the grisly rasp of steel against bone; a hot stream of blood spurted in his face. A terrible shriek rang in his ears.

Frantically Chico writhed and tried to jerk his body from the death bite of that steel blade. *"Madre de Dios! Merci me!"* Calling on God for mercy, Chico screamed, a reddish froth foaming on his lips. Fear filled his eyes. The grisly rattle of death choked his screams, and he fell to the floor.

As Stray wiped his blade on the serape that Juan had flung aside, a dry chuckle and the words "Boy, howdy!" jerked him around. A second he peered, then he leaped forward to greet Red Caskey, his old sidekick.

"Boy, yuh don't respect a great man a-tall," chided Red. "Yuh've done went and ripped the belly outa Mexico's fanciest knife sticker!"

"Yuh got away?"

"Shore! Leave it to ole Red," grinned the little ranger, winking broadly. "He's a lady killer. He done talked a black-eyed señorita intuh ontyin' him and givin' him back his hawglaigs. Then he comes a-huntin' Chico and found—this!"

"Lem Coudray and his men are goin' to be rubbed out, unless—"

"I savvy. The señorita told me. We'd better light a shuck. I found yuhr red hawss and got yuhr pistols. They's a short cut cross the Rio to that ole Stirrup Ranch, but we'll have to shake a laig if we aim to save Lem's scalp."

As Stray swung into the saddle, Red tossed him his gunbelts and trigger-

less Colts. Like a shot blown from a gun, Panchita, Red's black mare, leaped as the wiry ranger landed on her back. Neck and neck the raw-boned, red bay and the slender, sleek black raced. Few indeed were the horses that could have kept them in sight.

TWO miles at a break-neck speed, and then Red waved to Stray and turned into a faint trail that zigzagged through a chaparral thicket and down among a jumble of sand hills. The slow pace gave Red an opportunity to tell of how he had been captured and of how he had escaped. His tale ended with the words: "To-night we buck some regular old-time, he-badmen that's sidekickin' with Savella."

"Yeah, who are they?"

"One-eye Yolo Lautaro, an oldster that's wet more hawsses than ary rustler what ever had a John Law jump him across the River. Then there's Jupp Sarvey, a gun-slingin' fool from up Tucson way, and Big Thule who done time fer an Espee train stick-up. Also Scar Kenan, a badman from Alamogordo is with 'em."

"If we get there in time, we'll see how bad they are."

"We'll make it if these nags we're straddlin' can git down Reata Slide 'thout breakin' our necks. Ain't no use to try and head off Lem; no tellin' from what direction he'll come."

The sand hills gave way to rocky ridges that twisted higher and higher. Panchita picked a trail across foot-wide ledges, around frowning buttes; she slid across shaking rubbles of loose shale and leaped narrow crevices.

Down a ridge as narrow as a rail the black mare, her slipping hoofs striking sparks, worked slowly. Along a jutting ledge that crawled crazily up the face of a sheer cliff she clawed to a lofty parapet barely wide enough for two horses to stand upon.

While the horses rested the rangers smoked and talked. If they could descend Reata Slide safely and ford the Rio Grande without bogging in treacherous quicksands, they would reach the ranch an hour ahead of Savella and his gang.

Stray flipped his cigarette butt outward and watched it swirl down until a puff of wind shattered it to sparks. He heard Red's grim chuckle and asked: "What do we do, fly?"

"Jest about. Have yuhr lass rope out and lean back on Carbine's haunches, he'll be divin'. And keep yuhr ears open fer a rock slide behind yuh. Here goes!"

With ears pricked forward suspiciously, Panchita tipped over the lip of the ledge and disappeared down Reata Slide. Carbine was trailwise; he waited a moment, and then angling slightly to one side followed. Stray sat behind the saddle, hung his spurs in the cinch, and leaned far back over the mighty red horse. Reata Slide was well named. On squatting haunches, with front knees bent, and with hind feet acting as brakes, the horses slid down the almost perpendicular face of the cliff to the edge of the Rio Grande.

As they plunged into the water, Red called to Stray: "Keep behind; quicksand's bad on the other side."

Panchita had been gripped in the sucking maw of quicksand long before, and remembered. She knew that shallow water and bare sand were danger spots; so keeping in the current she cut across to a bushy point and scrambled up it to safety. The north side of the Rio was low-lying bottom timbered with moss-trailed liveoaks. Red and Stray pushed on rapidly through the timber to the River and followed it to a trail branching east and leading to the Stirrup Ranch. Red slid to the ground and lighted matches.

"No sign," he told Stray. "We're ahead of them rannies. We'll amble on up to the ranch and see what's what."

Thirty minutes later Carbine and Panchita were tethered in a bushy thicket, and the rangers were creeping up on the ranch house. From a nearby shack came the sound of a guitar.

Three Mexicans were making merry in the shack, but were not molested; their greeting of the coming Gang would go far to allay any suspicion that things were not as they should be. With a general plan of the buildings and their surroundings in mind, the rangers settled themselves to await the arrival of the Gang.

The craftiness of the old Border gunmen in the ranks of the Gang was apparent from the manner in which they approached the ranch house. In single file, stealthily as Indians on the warpath, they followed one another. Red grinned and nudged Stray as he counted five men, three pack horses with drivers, and then five more men. Their saddle horses must have been left near the Rio Grande.

The three pack horses stopped at the shack and the drivers entered; the other ten went on to the ranch house in which a light flared.

The rangers advanced on the ranch house from which came a mumble of voices. Side by side they stepped through the doorway. The gunmen were caught in a trap with only one exit, for the windows of the house were boarded up. Around a table the badmen were grouped, listening to Tony Savella, who faced the doorway. As his beady eyes flickered across the room, they were transfixed to an incredulous stare at sight of the rangers. What words leaped to his lips were never uttered.

"Elevate 'em! Name of the law! Hands up!"

Jack Briel laughed a brittle steely laugh with an edge to it like a razor. "Chico was right. That egg was an officer!"

"Git 'em up!" snarled Red Caskey. "When I count three, I start slingin' lead. One—two—"

"No damned lawman can take me alive!" gritted Savella. "Fight damn you!"

A shattering crash of six-guns rocked the room with deafening reports. Savella dropped below the table; an automatic leaped to his hand and with drumlike rhythm rattled and spat streamers of lead and flame. Stray and Red had leaped sidewise; one to the right, the other to the left. Reddish streaks of fire lanced at them and a rain of lead beat a devil's tattoo on the door, which Red had jerked to behind him. Bullets whined through the smoky room.

Jack Briel charged the doorway, a stream of jagged fire spouting from his gun. Stray whipped his right Colt across. Its sinister muzzle belched lead. A slug crashed into Briel and spun him about like a top. A mocking leer twisted his thin face. His numbed hands dropped. For a long moment he balanced on death-paralyzed feet. Then his legs buckled and he crumpled lifelessly.

Gun fog filled the air. The crash of thundering six-guns jarred the room. An acrid mist of smoke stung eyes, nostrils, and bit at throats. Crouched lower, Stray swung his Colt in short arcs and thumb whipped their hammers. Big Thule lunged forward. He fanned his sixes until they rattled like the roll of musketry. A bullet crashed into his hip and spun him about in time to catch a slug in his hairy throat. His mouth popped open. His guns dribbled from his death-numbed hands. Reeling, he clawed at his throat, stumbled blindly, and staggered into the table smashing it to the floor.

Red Caskey, his eyes two balls of greenish fire, fought a duel with Scar Kenan, sent him to the floor, and whirled to face One-eye Yolo. The gangling rustler leaped at the redhead just as a gust of lead swept toward him. He reeled backward; then shaking his head he braced himself and tried to raise his guns. The effort was too much. Death had touched him. He clutched at his left breast and tried to pluck out the bullet that had ripped into his heart. Groggily, he swayed, blood spurted from between his clawing fingers. Knees slowly bent, he

turned and plunged flat on his face.

Gun roars ceased suddenly. The smugglers were defeated. Sullenly they backed to the wall, hands raised above their heads. Stray crammed shells into his Colts; then stooped to gather up the guns thrown down by the defeated men.

From beneath the table a dagger of flame stabbed at him. A white-hot streak tore across his forehead and blinded him. Shaking his head, he straightened and stumbled backward.

A shrill yell of triumph and the rattle of an automatic fell on his ears. Twisting, he flung himself sidewise just as Tony Savella raised up from beneath the table. His face was a mask of hatred. His automatic spouted flame and lead in a torrent. What few of his men not dead had deserted him. From his thick lips spouted a stream of snarling curses. He was determined to get the young ranger.

Stray's left gun thundered. A slug ploughed into Savella's shoulder and spun him half around. He went to his knees. Instinctively he clutched at the wound. For a moment he swayed, cursing like a pirate. Then his hate-filled eyes flamed like a wolf's; he lurched to his feet and started forward.

Again Stray's Colt flamed. A heavy bullet ripped viciously into Savella's abdomen. The gangster's face blanched with agony. He bent over, lower and lower; the automatic slipped from his hands, and he collapsed in a heap.

A shout sounded outside. Then the words "What's goin' on in there?" reached Stray's ears. Red Caskey grinned at Stray and called out: "This way, Lem. Come on in."

A gray-haired man, with a hard, weather-beaten face, followed by half a dozen grim-faced Border officers crowded into the doorway. A moment they stood appalled at the scene of carnage, then they stepped forward to help Red with the prisoners.

"There's yuhr River Gang, Lem, what's left of 'em. And here's yuhr undercover man," drawled Red, slapping Stray on the back.

IN THE NEXT ISSUE—

OREGON HOSSES

By FRANCIS W. HILTON

A Yarn That Is Brimming with Action and Full of the Tang of the Rangeland

The First September Issue Goes On Sale, August 8th

Ask For ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE By Name

THE GLOOMY WRANGLER

By Paul Everman

"Most people complain because they ain't happy," said the boss of the Triangle Bar, "but Gloomy Dan, he ain't happy unless he can complain!"

"GLOOMY DAN" GRAVES, horse wrangler of the Triangle Bar Ranch and the champion pessimist of Badger County, stood shivering at the beam-topped corral gate and shook his long head lugubriously upon the warlike preparations of his fellow-hands.

The other Triangle Bar men were swarming all over the place—roping out top mounts from the dusty corral, buckling on six-shooters, stuffing glinting cartridges into belts, tying slickers behind cantles, adjusting carbines on saddles. They kicked up considerable dust. They cursed cow thieves in general; Mexican cow thieves in particular. But their tumbling haste and an occasional vengeful brag told that they were eager for a promised adventure.

"It ain't right," complained Gloomy Dan to two fellow punchers, while he scratched his lank ribs against the gate post and rolled his eyes tragically. "If some greasers run off with a few Triangle Bar cows, I say let 'em go! This freezin' weather ain't fit to send a man out in, and Alf Ringo ort to realize it. I tell you, she ain't no fun! If I'd 'a' wanted to fight, I'd 'a' joined the army or got myself elected sheriff o' this godforsaken county, 'stead o' hirin' out with Alf. I ain't hankerin' to smell powder. I'm young yet—only twenty-eight. And I don't want no Mex rustler accidentally pot-shootin' this bosom what was meant to hug grandchildren to in my old age. All right! Laugh, you dang fools! You'll find that trailin' cow thieves through freezin' weather ain't no joke."

"Still got yore buzzard sign workin', have you, Dan?" laughed Alf Ringo, the stalwart, ruddy owner of the Triangle Bar, who had come striding up in time to hear. "You sweet old girl! Are you goin' with us or not? Suit yourself."

"I got no rifle," demurred the gloomy young man.

"Here's my old .44 carbine and cartridges to match." Ringo handed him a cartridge-belt and held up a weather-stained scabbard which contained the Winchester .44. "Saddle up a mount if you're wantin' to join our little party."

"I already got Old Prince saddled up," said Gloomy Dan, glancing dolefully at the big chestnut sorrel hitched to the fence. "This freezin' weather ain't even fit to send a hoss out in—'specially a good old scout like Prince. And them dang rustlers might shoot him."

"More buzzard sign!" twitted Alf Ringo good-humoredly grabbing for his reins. "Well, my young grandma, I've sorta got used to yore cheerful disposition. I like you for the same reason I hate to shoot a thievin' burro or sell off a spoilt hoss. And if you want to stay *here* and warm yore sock by the fireplace, jest say so."

"Oh, I'll go," answered Gloomy Dan hastily, adding, in a tone of sacrifice, "sence I'm expected to."

And so, five minutes later, Alf Ringo turned in his saddle, waved his big gray Stetson, and cried to his men in ringing tones: "Hi, boys! We'll get the cows—and we'll get the thieves. Tie yore hats to yore saddles and let's ride!"

Tailing the impetuous cavalcade, Gloomy Dan Graves found tragic triumph in this complaint to Old Prince: "I guess this proves it, Prince! We're goin' after these bloody greasers agin our better judgment. This is what we get for belongin' to Alf Ringo's cow outfit. We might jest as well take a header over a cut-bank, and die quick!"

Dan, the gloomiest young man in Badger County, had been with the Triangle Bar for a year. "First time I looked at that long splinter of humanity," Alf Ringo would chuckle, "it made me want to cry! He jest struck me that way—mouth all curved down like a wagon-sheet frame, and that long head o' his a-droopin' low, and them gloomy eyes o' his lookin' like they'd never seen a happy day. But ever sence I hired him, I've been wantin' to *cuss*—him and his pesky buzzard sign."

Gloomy Dan loved horses; perhaps this was why he had sought the job of horse wrangler. When he had time left from his wrangling duties, it was his habit to lend an efficient, if complaining, hand in the other lines of ranch work. But he never failed to complain. He complained about everything except the animals which were in his charge. He never sulked, however; his gloom was open, vocal, vociferous, irrepressible.

And the Triangle Bar men, sometimes amused, sometimes disgusted, had found a name for his perpetual fault-finding and direful predictions and inconsolate gloom. "Buzzard sign," they called it, because to them the wheeling flight of the aerial scavengers signified calamity and death: favorite topics of Gloomy Dan.

At the first news concerning the Mexican rustlers, he had set his "buzzard sign" to working. A kid rider from Langton's outfit had brought the news. Scouting for strays along Big Sandy Creek, he had come across four Mexicans driving a herd of fifty cows. He had read Triangle Bar brands on the cows, and his suspicions had been aroused by the actions of the drovers. So he had ridden thirty miles to tell Alf Ringo of his discovery, and then departed for his home ranch.

The day was raw and there was no sun. It was almost dusk when Alf Ringo, vengeance-bent, reached Big Sandy Creek with his chilled posse of five men.

"I guess this is the place the kid meant," said the boss, gesturing along the northern bend of the swift, muddy little stream. "I figger right here is where he met the rustlin' outfit. They ort to be fifteen or twenty miles away by now. We'll have to work out a trail afore it gets dark. We'll make camp here, 'cause she's goin' to be black as pitch tonight, and it'd be foolish to make a blind hunt. Hey, you boys! Show me some life! We've got to get the trail now, so's we'll know what general direction to take in the mornin', case a heavy rain comes and puts out all the trace."

The Triangle Bar punchers got stiffly out of their saddles and slapped numb shoulders with their hands, muttering curses against the weather. Bending over, eyes on the ground, they followed Alf Ringo's example, seeking signs of the rustlers.

All but Gloomy Dan. Wrapping a long leg about his saddle, he eyed the proceeding with a melancholy eye.

"It's a crime," said he. "Tryin' to make Injuns out of a bunch o' respectable cowhands! I wisht one o' them dang greasers would pop out from behind a bush and plug me in the brisket right now. I prefer a Colt's slug to freezin' to death by inches."

Wheeling Old Prince, he withdrew from the trailers and made an apparently aimless circle along the slope, some two hundred yards west of the creek. Dusk was deepening. Against the gray northern sky, the low, faint smudge of the Funeral Mountains showed dismally.

"This here trail's shore goin' to be a mess, Alf," called one of the discouraged trailers at last. "They's been loose stock runnin' all along this crick."

"Jest keep a-lookin'," cheered the stalwart boss. "We'll cut signs directly."

But another half-hour's search brought no key to the puzzle.

A spiritless shout drew the men to the gloomy wrangler, who sat huddled on Old Prince, back from the creek.

"You might as well give it up," he grumbled. "You boys don't know a cow or horse track from a well in the ground. If they's any trailin' done, I reckon I'll have to do it myself."

Striking off up the slope, he suddenly reined in Old Prince, throwing the horse back on its haunches, and waved dramatically for the others to come up, keeping his eyes on the dim ground all the while.

"Here's your trail!"

"By doggies!" exclaimed the stalwart Ringo, peering low. "He's cut the trial, shore enough! She runs north, I reckon—shore she does! Reckon she'll end up in the old Funerals, or skirt 'round the range. We'll bag the greasers tomorrow, boys! Whee!" And he waved his hat enthusiastically.

The boss's hale and hearty manner and the discovery of the rustler's trial seemed to revive the Triangle Bar punchers, whose fiery spirits had been noticeably dampened by the chilling ride and the prospects of a blind hunt. They let out a stirring yell. All but Gloomy Dan.

"You sweet old girl!" chuckled Alf Ringo, slapping the wrangler's bowed back. "Who'd 'a' thought *you'd* been the hero of this little party. We got to admit it, boys. He's the top trailer in this crowd."

"Hero, hell!" disclaimed Gloomy Dan. "I done molded a bullet for my own hide when I cut that trail. If I don't freeze tonight, a greaser'll plug me tomorrer. Sech weather! Lookit pore Sinky Jones over there." He waved pessimistically at one of the punchers, who leaned on his saddle, wracked with a fit of coughing. "He's already ketched a bad cold what'll likely end up in lung fever afore this wild-goose chase is over."

"Aw, I'm all right," croaked Sinky Jones valorously. "If I git a crack at them cow thieves, I can die happy."

"Imagine that—a man dyin' *happy!*"

"More buzzard sign!" commented Alf Ringo and gave orders to make camp.

Gloomy Dan suddenly became active and assumed charge of the mounts of the party. Two of the punchers were prowling in the darkness along the Big Sandy, seeking dry wood for a fire. As a campsite Ringo chose an arroyo, where a bluff bank offered some shelter against the raw wind. A drizzling rain was falling.

"That's what I get for bein' hoss wrangler!" groaned Gloomy Dan, stumbling out of the pitchy blackness. "You fellers can't even look out after your own hosses."

"Nobody axed yuh to take our hosses, did they?" coughed Sinky Jones.

"No; but you all expected it of me. And you'd probably left wet blankets and saddles on the pore critters if I hadn't tended to 'em. Hey!" In a startled tone, Gloomy Dan addressed the puncher whose flickering match gleamed near the pile of wood. "Surely you ain't goin' to start up a fire! We don't know — mebbe them Mex cow thieves ain't far away! Mebbe they'll sight our fire and sneak back and pot us for keeps."

"Got a match, Al?" inquired the fire-builder. "Mine's wet."

Another match bared promptly in Gloomy Dan's hand. Its puny flame licked upward against a dry chip. On his bony knees, the young wrangler nursed the fire along expertly, and soon the pile was ablaze, sputtering in the drizzle.

"Thought yuh didn't want a fire, Dan?" jeered one of the men. "Thought yuh was afeared o' them rustlers?"

"I prefer a greaser's bullet to a freezin' death," came the morose reply, and Gloomy Dan began to spread out wet saddle blankets about the fire. "And anyways, greasers or no greasers, these blankets has got to be dried afore morning. It's a crime to cinch a soaked blanket on a hoss!"

"Where you goin' now?" called Alf Ringo, as Gloomy Dan went groping into the darkness.

"Oh, I have to do all the work round this camp," came the complaining answer. "I'm goin' to get more wood—if a greaser don't get me first!"

His ruddy face shining in the firelight, Ringo sent a quizzical glance among his punchers. "That sweet young grandma!" he observed. "He's funny! A man what treats hosses as good as he does must have some good in himself, spite o' his spavined disposition. But nothin' jest suits him. He complains about the hoss wranglin'. I've offered a dozen times to give him a straight ridin' job, only to have him fix up some excuse to stay with the remuda. He's funny! But they's times when his buzzard sign gets plumb monotonous."

The men had little to say. They huddled about the fire, trying to get thawed out. Despite the protection of the arroyo bank, a chill, ceaseless wind howled over them and stung them. The fire sputtered in the drizzling rain.

"Sech a night!" shivered Gloomy Dan, stumbling up with a load of wood. "If them rustlers gets away on a night like this I say that they earned their cows! Is the beef and gravy ready, boys? And coffee— good old steamin' black coffee that'll put the fire in your bones!"

"Shut up!" said a hungry puncher.

Gloomy Dan laughed hollowly. "You say we ain't gonna have anything to eat? Not even a cold snack? The commissary must've fell down in arrangin' for this military expedition. Well, I reckon the best thing we can do is crawl in our nice warm blankets and pull the old tarps over us and take a pleasant snooze, so's we can die warm when them foxy greasers come slippin' back on us!"

Glowering glances answered him. Neither provender nor bedding had been brought along. The camp was fated to be cold, bedless, supperless.

And Alf Ringo, keen to understand that a cowboy can endure a lot of exposure but that an empty stomach is a producer of low morale, said sharply to Gloomy Dan:

"That'll be enough buzzard sign for awhile, grandma!' '

Springing up, he began a mimic war dance about the fire, slapping his legs and shoulders, and crying boisterously:

"Come on, boys! Work yore legs a little and get warmed up! This ortn't to be a funeral for husky boys like you. You've got red blood in yore veins. What if we do miss a meal or two? Ain't a fight with a pack o' thievin' greasers worth it? Fall in, boys! We'll bag the gang in the morning! And then we'll shore have a rip-snortin' barbecue with all the trimmin's when we get home!"

Stirred by their stalwart leader's rousing invitation, the men sprang up and fell in behind him, yelling and stamping. All but Gloomy Dan.

"Now I reckon we better turn in," grinned Af Ringo, flinging himself on the damp ground. "We'll roll out at daybreak and take the trail."

With freshened spirits his men were soon stretched out by the fire, huddled in their slickers. Despite the cold, uncomfortable beds, they might have relaxed into slumber, had it not been for the wrangler's buzzard sign.

Gloomy Dan didn't lie down. He remained hunkered by the fire, his angular form casting a wavering, grotesque shadow against the arroyo bank.

He began to talk monotonously about Mexicans. These cow thieves they were trailing were Mexicans. There were four of them, the Langton kid rider had said.

"It's up to me to stay up and guard," complained Gloomy Dan, tossing a chip into the blaze, "else the long dingbusted greasers'll double-back on us and butcher us all down."

Mexicans were treacherous and crafty, but they were not cowards, he went on. He'd known a cowhand who was later killed by vaqueros in Old Mexico. This cowhand's death had been frightful (and Gloomy Dan gave all the details).

"These greasers ain't cowards, I tell you," he declared moodily, tossing in another chip. "That is, no more cowards than we are. We're all cowards at heart. I'm a coward—I admit it. I don't like the prospec' of a greaser slippin' up behind me with a big knife. Boys, the cold steel is awful. My God, did you hear that coyote howl?"

The stretched-out men had been fidgeting uneasily during the wrangler's direful recitation. Now, at the coyote's unearthly howl, they sat up sharply, and then relaxed grumbling. Sinky Jones underwent a fit of coughing that left him breathless.

Gloomy Dan's buzzard sign was getting on the Triangle Bar's nerves.

Alf Ringo towered over the hunkered wrangler.

"Pile down!" he ordered grimly. "And if you start any more buzzard sign tonight, I'll shore knock it down yore throat with the butt of a .45!"

The black night dragged on. The wind howled. The men slept fitfully. The fire sank to a murky glow. Every half hour or so, the harsh cough of Sinky Jones would disrupt the quietude of the arroyo. The men slept—all but one. After a time he rose stealthily, crept to Sinky Jones and laid something over that puncher's chest and shoulders. Finally it began to get light.

"Roll out!" came Gloomy Dan's spiritless shout, at the first tinge of light in the east.

As the rising men stretched stiffly and yawned and groaned, he complained: "I reckon it's up to me to bring in all the hosses. Last to bed and first out—that's what I get for bein' a hoss wrangler. And I slept cold last night. I'm right near friz! Sinky Jones had my coat all night. Oh, I spread it over him. If that cold o' his runs into lung fever, you can't blame it onto me! I ain't doubtin' that I'll get lung fever myself, sleepin' so cold. But nobody cares what happens to the hoss wrangler!"

The men mounted stiffly and wheeled their plunging horses around

Ringo preparatory to taking the trail.

"Show a little spirit, boys!" cried Ringo, with a booming laugh. "Forget Dan's buzzard sign. Them cow thieves can't be more'n twenty miles off. We ort to corral the whole bunch. Uh—say, Dan—where is that dang-busted trail anyways?"

And so Gloomy Dan dismounted and took the lead, working out the puddled tracks.

"Ain't you all got eyes as good as mine?" he complained. "I might know I'd be expected to do all the work on this scout."

Presently, the sun came up over the eastern end of the low, mist-hung Funeral Mountains, and Gloomy Dan swung up astride Old Prince. Leaning forward, eyes on the ground, he began to follow the tracks at an easy canter, while the others marveled at his ability as a trailer. "Aw, well, a hoss wrangler ort to know somethin' about follerin' tracks," said one grudingly.

Nearer and nearer to the mountains they rode. At the entrance to a small canyon, which opened into the gray, rocky upheaval, Gloomy Dan reined in his chestnut sorrel and began running about, his eyes searching the ground.

"Well, I s'pose I'm expected to mold another bullet for my hide by tellin' which way the greasers went with the cows," he orated, martyr-like. "Myself, I ain't hankerin' to smell powder—and them Spicks ain't far ahead. They camped right here last night. They've got about fifty cows, like that kid rider said. They's four of 'em, and they got a fresh-shod pack mule with 'em. They et breakfast here, and they're drivin' tol'able fast up that canyon—about four hours ahead."

Alf Ringo scratched his head. "How do you figger all that?"

"Tracks!" snorted the gloomy wrangler. "Call me a liar, I reckon! Well, there's the tracks. Figger it out for yourself. And here's the campfire, with coals still red."

"By doggies! I guess you're right," admitted Ringo, running his eyes over the ground, noting the various kinds of tracks and the fire.

Turning, with an eager whoop he called his men about him for a council of war.

"Boys," he declared, pounding fist in palm, "we ort to grab every feather of this covey. If I ain't mistaken, this is the same rustlin' outfit what's been workin' in these parts for some time. I think they've been all the time makin' Dolores Canyon, over on t'other side o' the Funerals, their headquarters. It means a lot to the cowmen of this range if we can bust 'em up for fair. Are you with me, boys?"

"Sure. Let's go, Alf!" growled the Triangle Bar men—all but Gloomy Dan.

"They'll prob'ly stand a fight," smiled Ringo. "Listen, I'm jest like a prairie dog in an old hole, in these mountains. They's a bridle trail leads acrost from Sulphur Canyon, two miles down the range, and then drops in this here canyon, further in. I'm goin' to take Dan and Sinky with me. We'll hit the bridle trail. If we ride, we can head off the rustlers in the lead. The rest of you boys come slow in their rear, up this canyon. Jest hang behind, the minute you sight 'em. But don't forget you got rowels—if you hear shootin' ahead. Dan—Sinky—let's ride!"

The three plunged away. Entering Sulphur Canyon, they shot along a winding, little-used bridle path, through scrub-oak and cedar and piñon. Galloping swiftly in the lead along the more level stretches, Ringo would cast a glance behind every now and then, and was surprised to find Gloomy Dan right at his own mount's flank, while Sinky brought up the rear. But the wrangler's long countenance was that of a suffering martyr.

After three hours' hard riding, they angled down a northeastern mountain slope. And soon, behind a sheltering boulder, Ringo drew up for a breathing spell.

"The canyon's right below—around

that ridge," said he, swiftly. "I think mebby we're in time."

"Yeh," snorted Gloomy Dan, reaching down and pulling the Winchester carbine from under his thin leg. "It'd be a shame if we was too late to attend our own funeral! They sure named these hills right when they called 'em the Funerals. And I ain't even got a decent rifle. This old .44 o' your'n looks like it'd been clean through the Civil War, Alf. Us three'll have to start this here fight, and the other boys won't show up till we start shootin'. Then it'll be too late. The greasers'll be four against our three. And Sinky here too sick with a cold to be a fightin' man. Here I am—hired to wrangle hosses 'stead o' fightin' cow thieves—riskin' my life, all for a little ol' bunch o' doggies!"

Of a sudden Alf Ringo whirled on him. His rudy face purpled.

"That's enough, Dan!" he almost shouted. "You've been the joner o' this party all the way through. You've been a help in some ways, but yore cussed buzazrd sign has done a heap o' damage. I savvy you're scairt. Well, yore chance to get away from this fight you been dreadin' has come.

"Now," he commanded wrathfully, pointing back up the trail. "Go back home and warm yore socks by the fire. Vamoose!"

"Aw—" began Gloomy Dan.

"Git!"

Slowly, the wrangler turned Old Prince and presently disappeared behind a bend in the trail. His grumbling words came back: "I ain't appreciated. . . ."

Ringo shot a queer glance at Sinky Jones.

"I'm shore tired a-plenty o' his dang-busted buzzard sign," he said grimly. "Well, I hate to call any man a coward—but Dan's the same as admitted that's what he is. Come on, Sinky. We'll head off the greasers—you and me!"

The canyon bed lay deep between the rocky slopes. A rutty road ran along the eastern edge, and on the west a six-foot arroyo dropped between bluff banks. Rushing white clouds hid the sun. The canyon had a bleak, pinched appearance, and on its uneven floor a profusion of boulders stood out, lonely and cold.

Crouched behind one of these boulders, Alf Ringo and Sinky Jones watched and in a short time saw the stolen herd of Triangle Bar cows pass by.

"I don't savvy it, Sinky," muttered the boss. "There's the cows—but only *one* rustler!"

A rattle of shod hoofs sounded. And Ringo suddenly shot into the road. Winchester against shoulder, he confronted the lone drover, who brought up the rear.

"*Como lo va, amigo?*" innocently sang out the drover, who was a Mexican.

"Stop, hombre!" ordered Ringo roughly. "Where's yore three *compadres?* Come acrost, you snake, afore I push the button!"

The Mexican shrugged. "*No sabe.*"

Behind Ringo, Sinky Jones yelled, "There they are, Alf! Sneakin' along that arroyo!"

Ringo whirled. The Mexican rider ducked, put the rowels to his mount, shot to the left and disappeared among the rocks before a bullet could check him.

From the arroyo sounded a spiteful clamor of rifles. Ringo staggered back, clutching at his thigh. He grunted an oath as his leg buckled beneath him and he slipped to the ground.

"Did they git yuh, Alf?" panted Sinky Jones, dragging his boss behind the shelter of the big boulder.

"Kinda," grated Ringo, drawing his Winchester to shoulder and lining his sights toward the arroyo. "I reckon they's three of 'em in that arroyo. The sly varmints! Must've spied us comin' down that bridle trail and three of 'em took to the arroyo so's to beat us to the trap. Where'd that fourth one go—that rider?"

From among the rocks to the left, a rifle cracked answer. Sinky Jones slapped a hand to his cheek, and then stared foolishly at the red stain on his fingers.

"Scorched my mug," he grimaced, dropping flat. "We got to get that fourth man, Alf! They got us in a cross-fire!"

The Triangle Bar cows were drifting aimlessly up the canyon. The three rustlers had come dodging up from the arroyo. Smoke puffs, showing now at one rocky covert, then at another, always appearing nearer and nearer, told that they were closing in. At the left, the fourth Mexican poured a withering fire down on the two Triangle Bar men.

"Can't our boys—hear the shootin'?" panted Ringo, pumping lead furiously toward the smoke puffs on the right. "We got to stand these snakes off till they git here. Sinky—you try to get that greaser what's above us—in them rocks. I'll keep these three off—for a minute!"

"Hi-yee!" yelled a familiar voice savagely.

There was a choking moan. The Mexican in the rocks above came toppling into view and fell flat on his face.

"Hi-yee!" came the savage yell again. An angular figure leaped past the Mexican, carbine swinging in hand.

"Gloomy Dan!" gasped Alf Ringo. "And he got that greaser!"

"Come on, you varmints!" howled Gloomy Dan, darting from bush to rock and from rock to cedar, punctuating a temporary halt with the spurting flame of his carbine. "Hi-yee! There goes number two. Come on—Alf—Sinky! Whoopy-yi!"

From the south came a swift thud of hoofs. The three other Triangle Bar men broke into view.

Two dark-skinned shapes rose from behind rocky shelter and fled precipitately toward the arroyo.

"Head 'em off, Sinky!" howled Gloomy Dan, loping furiously in pursuit. "They's only two left!"

And, a minute later, when the Triangle Bar riders bolted down into the arroyo, they found a Mexican groaning in the dust and a second one glaring into the muzzle of Gloomy Dan's carbine.

"This here one," complained the wrangler, poking the upright rustler in the ribs with the carbine, "he wouldn't stand up and fight—the dang-busted coward!"

An hour later, the Triangle Bar cows had been brought back, wounds had been dressed, captives bound, a cheery fire built. And the Triangle Bar men—all save Gloomy Dan—were discussing the day's excitement. Gloomy Dan was on his knees by the fire, sorting out some grub from the mule pack of the rustlers.

"That sweet old girl!" grinned Alf Ringo, pressing a hand to his wounded thigh. "He called himself a coward! And I called him a coward, too, and told him to git for home. And yet he come sneakin' back in time to be the hero of this little party! But I begin to savvy that young feller! You see, most folks complain because they ain't happy. But Gloomy Dan, *he ain't happy unless he can complain!* Jest listen!"

"Jest my luck!" the gloomy hero was snorting, while he nibbled at a piece of jerked beef. "They expect me to rustle wood for a fire, and cook the chuck, and wrangle the hosses, and help with the cows, and do the trailin' and do the fightin' and risk my life—all for a little ol' thirty-five a month. I ort to've joined the army, 'stead o' hirin' out with Alf Ringo. I never saw sech a gol-darned outfit. Nobody cares what happens to the blamed old hoss wrangler!"

"More buzzard sign!" laughed Alf Ringo. "But say, boys, did you notice the way he put his buzzard sign on them rustlers?"

THE TONTO RATTLER

By L. R. Sherman

A borrowed rattler's sting poisons a lead-slingin' badman.

CROUCHED between two concealing boulders at the top of a high knoll, a young man in the bright garb of a cowpuncher on a holiday gazed steadily into the north. Below him wound a well defined trail. To the north a tiny cloud of dust drew closer until a single horseman, riding south from Gunther, could be plainly distinguished as the cause of the cloud.

The silent watcher glanced to the south. His attitude became tense, his eyes hard and speculative. Down that same trail, and heading north from Flintlock, was another dust cloud, much larger than the first. It marked the progress of six horsemen, farther away, but coming fast. The young man's glance shifted rapidly from the group of six in the south to the lone rider in the north. Apparently he was estimating chances.

"Just c'n make it," he muttered, and withdrew behind the boulders.

Running to a big black stallion concealed in a grove of cottonwoods behind the brow of the knoll, he mounted and rode swiftly toward the Gunther-Flintlock trail. His course led down a narrow defile whose brush-choked mouth opened onto the trail. He dismounted behind this wall of brush. He listened intently. The hoofbeats of a rapidly approaching horse could be distinctly heard.

Jerking up the red silk scarf until it was stretched tightly across the bridge of his nose and hung down completely concealing the lower part of his face, he wormed his way through the brush and knelt behind its last fringe at the edge of the trail. His narrowed eyes were centered on a curve in the trail as he gave the wide brim of his Stetson a jerk that further concealed his features.

The lone horseman sped around the

curve and the watcher tensed. His body straightened and with the spring of a panther he was in the center of the road. His right hand snapped down and out, and in it a forty-five gave authority to the left hand raised in a command to halt.

The rider reined his horse to a plunging stop, while his naturally pale face took on an added pallor. His narrow features, with their sharp lines, his gray mustache and shifty, restless eyes gave him the appearance of a cornered rat. Thin lips parted in an unconscious snarl, as his glance roved over the tall figure in front of him, with its bright blue silk shirt, its red scarf, gray Stetson and ornate boots.

"Quick, Snathey, that bag!"

The crisp tones of the masked man accompanied a motion of the gun toward a small grip tied to the saddle horn.

The rider's hand reached out to the bag. Faintly, came the sound of the horsemen approaching from the south. For a second the hold-up's glance shifted down the trail, and in that second Snathey's hand disappeared inside his unbuttoned coat. A short-muzzled, nickle plated thirty-eight appeared in it.

Quick as he was, he was far too slow. The masked man had caught the accelerated motion of Snathey's hand and his glance snapped back to his victim. The forty-five roared. With a startled cry, Snathey dropped the reins as his left hand clutched his shattered right forearm while the short-muzzled revolver dropped to the ground.

"Thought you knew me better 'n to try that, Ab," the masked man snapped, with a gesture toward his sombrero.

The victim stared down at the snakeskin hat band, with its nine rattles forming a tassel.

"The Tonto Rattler," he gasped, for the moment forgetting the pain of his bleeding arm.

"Right! Now get t' hell down the trail."

The Rattler had stepped forward while he was speaking. With his left hand he slipped off the loop by which the satchel was hung from the saddle horn. Then, hitting the horse a slap with the barrel of his six-gun, he sent the animal flying southward.

Scarcely had the horse taken its first, frightened plunge when a chorus of yells caused the Rattler to whirl. The six men he had first seen were charging up the trail toward him. The sound of the shot had hurried their pace and sight of the masked man and the running horse with its frightened rider had appraised them of what had happened.

The leader, a big, red faced man with the undershot jaw of a bulldog and the garb of a prosperous rancher, had drawn a gun and commenced firing. His lead whined past the Tonto Rattler.

"Dan Killian and his tough punchers. Damn!"

For a split second the masked man hesitated, as though he would like to make a stand and fight it out where he was. The next instant he had disappeared into the brush beside the trail, and with the grip clutched in one hand, was racing toward the waiting black.

Swinging into the saddle, he headed the horse up the defile at full speed, while from behind came the crashing of the pursuing riders as they charged after him. The scarf slipped down over his chin, revealing half smiling lips, and blue eyes alight with excitement.

Shots sounded from the rear, but he gave them no heed. He knew that the thickets through which he was threading his way afforded but brief glimpses of himself to his pursuers. Finally the shooting and yelling ceased, but the sound of the pounding horses continued. The six had settled down to steady, silent, determined pursuit.

The defile widened and finally spread out into a broad valley with grasslands dotted with groves of cottonwoods and birch. Here the black showed his speed. As he flashed into the open country the Tonto Rattler leaned for-

ward and seemed to whisper into the powerful stallion's ear. The animal's stride lengthened.

Less than a quarter of a mile behind the pursuers rode into the open and, with their quarry once more in sight, let out a chorus of exultant cries. The slim rider gave a yell and the black's body seemed to lower, to skim the ground, while the rush of wind from his increased speed plastered the brim of the Stetson against its crown.

Gradually the distance between the lone horseman and the others lengthened. A quarter of a mile, a half, three quarters and, when the Rattler finally swung to the right, heading toward a jumble of low, rocky peaks, the distance between him and his pursuers had lengthened to a full mile.

There their relative positions remained stationary for a while. The stallion had traveled far that day and, with the sun slipping toward the western horizon, his earlier effortless, smooth stride became a trifle jerky. Foam whipped back from his distended nostrils. His breathing became labored. Slowly, the pursuers began to shorten the distance. It was apparent that their horses had been fresh when the race began.

At the northern rim of the valley the Rattler headed into a narrow canyon. Intersecting canyons entered from east and west, and into one of these the hunted man turned. Then, once more out of sight of the enemy, he slowed the pace of his mount. The gorge into which he had entered twisted and turned, but gradually ascended to a higher level. At length he rode out onto an open mesa.

At the far edge of this mesa a mountain wall, fringed at its base by a growth of spruce, rose to a snow-capped peak. Above the tops of the spruce the slopes of the mountain showed rocky and almost bare of vegetation.

"Now, boy, just once more. Then you get a rest."

Responding to his master's call for another burst of speed, the black gallantly increased his pace. Anxiously, now, the Rattler glanced often over his shoulder. So far the mesa was bare of any moving forms. He knew that he had failed to conceal his tracks as he had planned. Time had not permitted that. In spite of the fact that he had been out of sight of his enemies when he had turned into the second canyon, he knew that, though they would be delayed by this move, a fair tracker could pick out his trail.

"Got to get you to th' hide-out, boy. Hell!"

The oath was called forth by the appearance behind him of a file of moving dots that he knew to be horsemen. He was seen almost immediately and the dots commenced to move faster, to spread out. But he was near the belt of spruce now. A little later he disappeared into their shelter. Whirling at right angles, he rode along the base of the mountain wall until he came to a deep pocket whose entrance was concealed by tall brush and whose floor was covered with rich grass watered by the overflow from a small spring.

Dismounting, he untied the cinches and swung down the saddle. He picked up the grip and ran into a thicket behind the spring. Opening the satchel, he gave a quick glance at the tightly packed bundles of currency, snapped it shut, and tossed it into the low mouth of a small cave. Then he ran back to where his saddle lay and jerked the rifle from its boot.

Leaving the black, he hurried out of the pocket and started to scramble up the bare slope, at the same time working his way toward the point where he had entered the fringe of timber. Above him, and some distance ahead, a short boulder-dotted shelf appeared. It was toward this he climbed. When he reached it he cast his first glance back toward the mesa.

He was above the tops of the spruce now. There was a prayer of thankfulness in his heart as he saw that his pursuers had not yet entered the tim-

ber. Steadying his gun barrel across the top of one of the boulders, he took careful aim, and pressed the trigger. At the report there was a spurt of dust in front of the leading horse, while from the muzzle of his rifle a puff of smoke drifted upward in the still air of early evening.

The pursuers reined in their horses. An instant later one of them pointed toward the shelf and once more the six sped toward the belt of trees. The Rattler grinned, and set about rolling boulders to form a low wall along the edge and sides of his shelf.

He had been successful in hiding the black stallion and in turning the enemies' attention to himself. With knowledge of the position of their intended quarry, they would pay no attention to the horse. The black would have a chance to feed and rest, and be ready again to furnish his speed and strength when his master was in need of it.

The Tonto Rattler lost sight of the party when they entered the trees. To one looking down on the spruce, their wide spreading branches hid all but occasional glimpses of the ground. But Tonto knew that the men would dismount under shelter of the timber and creep up on him from the sides and front.

The sun had sunk behind him and the short twilight was fast deepening to the blackness of night when the Rattler finally stretched behind his stone barrier and carefully searched the slopes below and to each side. For a time there was no movement, nor any indication that a living thing was near him. Then he caught his first glimpse of the enemy since firing his signaling shot. It was merely a slight shifting of a dark object between two boulders below and to his right. He concentrated his attention on that spot.

Again there was movement. This time Tonto fired. There was a spurt of sparks as the lead hit a boulder in front of the man and whined away into space. From three sides came answering reports and the spattering of lead against his rocky breastwork. Crawling quickly to the other side of the shelf, the Rattler pumped lead at the spots where he had seen the flash of guns.

There was no immediate answer. He glanced around then, taking a more careful inventory of his own position and those of his pursuers. At his back was a low cliff a little wider than the ledge. At the top it overhung slightly. With his back against this cliff, the overhang would protect him from above. Imediately below and on each side there were few of the larger boulders. To reach their shelter before dark, the others would be too exposed to his fire. He had chosen his position well, he decided. Yet there was one weakness in it, which he immediately realized.

The fact that the cliff was but little wider than the shelf would not prevent the enemy from working up along its edge to a point where they could fire over the top of his bulwark and directly down onto the ledge. He could not erect his stone wall high enough to protect himself against this. Nor could he stop them from reaching that point during the night, but he must prevent it before darkness settled down, or he was lost.

A fusillade of shots from below sent lead spattering around him. As he replied with his own rifle fire he saw the man on his flank dart to a new position higher up. With a curse at the trick he had allowed to be played upon himself, he ignored those below and centered his attention on that man.

Again came the volley, and this time he did not answer it. Again, under cover of his companions' fire, the man darted forward. The Rattler got in two shots, and the man dropped behind a protecting boulder. Tonto was unable to tell whether or not he had scored a hit.

For a long time there was no more firing. Then a more daring maneuver was tried. There was the usual rattle

of gunfire to which the Rattler paid no attention. He was watching that boulder behind which the runner had dropped. A cry from below caused him to glance briefly aside. Dan Killian, the big, lantern-jawed leader had half arisen, exposing himself. Another of his men, taking the cue from his chief, also arose.

The invitation was too strong for him. Tonto whirled to fire. As he did so, he saw the boulder disgorge its man. The Rattler swung his rifle back, lifting himself above the rock wall in his effort to make sure of his shot. His gun was fired once. Its single shot was echoed by two from Dan Killian's gun. The running man was flattened in full view, halfway to his objective, but the Tonto Rattler sank behind the wall with a chunk of lead through his upper left arm.

Clamping his jaws, he watched through the interstices between the rocks which sheltered him the prone figure of the man he had dropped. The figure did not move. It was rapidly growing dark now. The prone man became a blur. Tonto wondered if his eyesight were failing, if the pain in his bleeding arm had weakened him so that he could not see to shoot.

He glanced up at the sky. The stars were beginning to appear. The protection of night had fallen just in time. He backed into the shelter of the overhang and sat up. He rolled up his sleeve and felt of his wound. There were two holes. That meant the bullet had gone through the arm. Cutting a strip from his undershirt, he made cloth plugs for the holes, and bound them in place. Then he leaned back to wait.

The long hours dragged. Occasionally there was a shot or two from below. None came from the direction of the prone figure. Tonto answered one of the shots. The second time his firing pin clicked into an empty chamber. He had no more rifle cartridges. Once three shots awoke him. He could not be sure whether he had dropped to a doze or whether he had fainted. The arm still throbbed and he knew he was weak from loss of blood. He answered the fire with his forty-five.

Then, when the position of the stars told him it was after midnight, lead began to hammer against the floor of his retreat. Under cover of darkness the others had obtained commanding positions. Daylight would bring his finish. He dared wait no longer.

He removed his boots, tying them about his neck in such a way that they would not strike anything. Leaving his empty rifle, he eased himself over his barrier, close to the edge of the cliff, and at the end of the shelf near where lay the man he had shot.

An inch at a time, his one good hand extended to clear the way of any loose stones that might rattle, or twigs that might snap, he moved slowly forward. His left arm was almost useless for feeling his way, but with clamped jaws, he made it bear a part of his weight while he explored ahead with his right hand.

A long, low, dark object loomed close to him. He touched it and felt the soft resistance of flesh and the contour of a man's face. The skin was cold and the man did not move. Tonto's fingers, exploring the forehead, came away sticky.

He crawled over the body and wormed his way forward. There was the sound of movement above him, and he flattened himself. A scraping sound was followed by the glow of a match that lit the heavy face of Killian as he held the flame to a cigarette under cover of a boulder. The Rattler cursed under his breath and reached for the gun he had thrust inside his shirt. He hesitated, then again moved forward cautiously.

How long he continued his slow progress he did not know. It seemed hours. Only when he could see ahead of him the dark outline of the trees at the edge of the mesa did he arise to his feet and hurry toward the concealed pocket.

Here he once more entered the cave. Groping around in the darkness he found a fresh shirt, scarf, boots and Stetson. Undressing with all the speed he could command, and gritting his teeth against the torture accompanying the movements of his wounded arm, he put on the other clothing. He could feel the trickle of fresh blood down his arm. His exertions had started the wound bleeding anew, but he ignored it. Dawn was close. He must be off the mesa before it became light.

Leaving the clothes he had removed cached with the grip containing the results of his hold-up, he saddled the black and headed through the belt of timber. When the first faint light of day was tinging the eastern skyline with pink, he commenced his descent to the canyon that had guided him to the mesa the previous afternoon.

He rode at a fast gait until, toward noon, he came out into the broad valley that he had first entered after accomplishing the hold-up. Here, instead of returning the way he had come, he headed on up the valley. Without rest, or food, except to water his horse and bathe his aching arm in the cool waters of a spring, he continued throughout the day. As the long afternoon drew to a close, he drooped in the saddle, no longer able to guide the black, scarcely conscious enough to keep his seat.

He lost track of direction, even became unconscious of his position. He only knew he must keep going, must continue to put distance between himself and those he knew were still on his trail. Once he caught himself wondering whether he had not made a mistake in not heading toward town. His answer came automatically. It was entirely too dangerous. He must completely elude his pursuers first.

At length he noticed dully, and without comprehension of its meaning, that the stallion was following some sort of a trail that had led through an opening in a wire fence. The horse stopped and Tonto looked up, dull-eyed with fatigue and weakness.

"You—you've been hurt—shot!"

The amazement in the shrill voice stirred the Rattler to attention. He got a grip on himself, forced himself to full consciousness, and found he was staring at a ragged urchin who sat astride a cow pony, blocking the narrow trail.

The habitual grin returned to Tonto's face, though it was a trifle strained.

"Who are you, sonny?" he managed to ask.

"'Little Lem,' they call me. My dad is Big Lem Carter, and our ranch is a couple mile up the trail."

Tonto regarded the lad with more attention. He had been startled out of his stupor and began to think more coherently. He slowly thrust one hand into a trousers' pocket. When he withdrew it he held a five dollar note. This he reached toward the lad.

"How'd you like to earn this, Bud?" he asked.

At the eager light in the urchin's eyes, his grin became a trifle more natural.

"Who d'you want me to dry-gulch," the lad asked.

The Rattler's smile became a chuckle.

"Nothin' like that, Lem. Know where Gunther is?"

Little Lem nodded.

"Will you take a message there for this five?"

"Hell, I'm headed there now, anyway. Lucky this ornery buckskin got away from me and it took me two-three hours to catch him, or I'd been gone long afore this. I'll do that for nothin'. An' you better get on up to th' house an' let maw fix you up."

"All right, Lem. Now you sit quiet a minute."

Tonto searched a shirt pocket and found the stub of a pencil. From a saddle pocket he drew out a box of cartridges. Removing the lid, he rested it on his saddle horn and, on its inner surface, slowly wrote a note in as fine characters as he could manage. When he had finished there was just room to sign his name. He folded the card-

board and handed it to the lad, who urged his pony forward until he could accept it. Tonto thrust both note and money into the boy's grimy fist.

"Know Jack Tait?" he asked.

Young Lem nodded, his eyes widening, his grimy lips parting slightly.

"Well, find him, sure. That note is to be given to no one but him. And that money is for speed. Savvy? When d'you expect you'll hit Gunther?"

"Ought to make it and back by morning," the lad replied promptly.

Tonto stared. Then,

"Hell, I must've been ridin' in a circle. Well, son, get goin'."

"You bet, mister. Watch my smoke."

Without another word, the lad urged his pony past the big black and started down the path at a run. The Rattler gazed after him, the grin returning to his fatigue and pain-lined face. Then the corners of his mouth drooped, his tall frame sagged once more, and, humped forward in his saddle, he headed the black along the trail. His moment of rejuvenation was gone, his long hours without sleep or food and the loss of blood, again demanded their toll.

His next conscious moment was when the black stopped and he heard the sound of footsteps following a man's startled exclamation.

"Well, stranger, reckon you better git down an' let Marty take a look at that arm o' your'n. Maw's right handy 'ith lead poisonin'. My name's Lem Carter."

The slow drawl had a kindly, soothing quality, and Tonto opened his eyes. A tall, spare, angular featured man in ragged shirt and overalls stood beside him. There was a shrewd expression in the man's brown eyes, but they were not unkindly. There was a movement beyond him and from the door of a low, ramshackle house a short, wiry woman of uncertain age, hurried forward.

"Paw, what you standin' there gassin' for. Can't you see th' lad's bad hurt? Get right down, lad, an' come in. I got some fresh corn bread an' beans waitin' that'll fix you up, an' I reckon a little nursin' an' a lot o' sleep'll help too."

Tonto dismounted stiffly.

"Thanks, stranger. I'll appreciate your lookin' after my horse. He's come far, an' needs—"

"You leave that right to me," Carter exclaimed, leading the horse toward a pole corral.

He had taken less than a dozen steps when he halted and looked back.

"Reckon I might put him in th' barn. Nobody'll see him then, if they come snoopin' around," he suggested shrewdly.

"Thanks! I'll take it kindly," Tonto nodded, turning toward the house.

Warm water and clean bandages, handled gently by the motherly Marty Carter, and a hearty meal sent a warm glow of gratitude surging over the Tonto Rattler. In his faded shirt, soiled trousers, and worn Stetson, he presented no semblance to the flashily dressed bandit who had relieved Ab Snathey of his grip full of currency the day before. He leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully rolled a cigarette. When he had finished, and looked up, he found both Lem Carter and his wife, Marty, regarding him. He smiled.

"It's about time you good folks knew who you're bein' kind to. My name is Charley Parsons, from over Gunther way."

"Parsons! I've heard o' you before, ain't I?" Carter suggested, his brow wrinkling in thought.

"Yep, maybe. Small rancher like yourself,—'nesters', they call us."

"By Godfrey, you're th' man that drove that big rancher, Killian, off your place at th' muzzle of a Colt. I sure 've heard about you."

Parsons' smile widened a little at the recollection. In a moment he sobered once more.

"And, now that my brain's workin' a little, I've heard of you. I understand the Gunther Bank, that Ab Snathey

ran, went broke an' that they held a mortgage on your place. Killian's been made receiver, and he sure hates nesters."

The interest in the newcomer that had for a time animated Carter disappeared, and an expression of hopelessness spread over his face. His narrow shoulders drooped more than ever.

"Yep, I heard she's closed her doors. Snathey held my mortgage, which is due next week. He also held my savings, which was just enough to cover that mortgage. Killian's been wantin' this stretch of range for some time. He'll sure foreclose. Ranch gone. Savings gone. Nothing left to do but get out. No money to move with, an' no place to go if I had it. Reckon this is th' end of th' trail."

Carter stared moodily before him with unseeing eyes. Young Parsons caught his breath as though he were moved by an impulse to make some disclosure. He caught himself before he had spoken, and remained silent for a moment. He glanced toward the woman. There were tears in her patient eyes as she watched Lem, her man. Parsons arose slowly and walked around the table, placing a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Don't give up yet, Carter. You're doing me more of a service than you know. Maybe I can do something for you in return. And now, if you've a bunk I can stretch out on for two-three hours sleep, I'm sure hankerin' for rest. That bandaging an' meal sure put pep in me for awhile, but she's wearin' off."

Then little Marty sprang up, her face and eyes smiling, as though she read certain cause for hope in the words of her guest.

"You poor lad. You come right with me. I'll give you young Lem's bunk. He's gone to Gunther an' won't be back till tomorrow. You get a good sleep now," she finished as she turned back the blankets on a bunk in a small room adjoining the living room.

Parsons drew off his boots and, without pausing to undress further, rolled into the blankets, murmuring something about Mrs. Carter not allowing him to sleep more than three hours as he had to be moving along. The little woman smiled knowingly, but said nothing.

It was just daylight when Parsons was awakened from a sleep so sound that for a moment he did not know where he was, or realize what had happened. There were excited voices in the next room, and he listened to them dully.

"You say they was five of them?" came the sharp voice of the older Lem Carter.

"Yep, and they was headed for here. Ought to be here any minute now," was the reply in a youthful, excited treble.

"Maw," resumed Carter, "you shouldn't have let young Parsons sleep so long. I bet they're after him. Go wake him, quick. I'm goin' out to meet that gang."

Charley Parsons was out of the bunk now, and pulling on his boots. He met Mrs. Carter at the door. She appeared excited and a trifle frightened.

"I heard part of it, Mrs. Carter," Parsons cried as he stepped into the living room.

Carter had taken a rifle from the wall and was about to leave the cabin. Young Lem, breathless, was standing by the table.

"Wait a minute, Carter. Can't let you get mixed up in this.

"Lem," he continued, facing the lad, "did you deliver my message?"

The boy nodded violently.

"Yep, I saw Jack Tait soon's I got to town. Then I high-tailed it right back. He read th' note, started swearin', and—"

"Never mind the rest. Who's comin'?"

"That polecat, Dan Killian, and four of his roughnecks."

"Get my horse, quick, son. Saddle him and wait for me," Parsons ordered sharply.

The youth whirled and ran out the door. Parsons drew his gun, spun the

cylinder, and returned it to its holster.

"Reckon maybe I c'n get rid o' them four-flushers without any gunplay, Carter. Leave the thing to me, and put your gun down. No use startin' trouble."

Carter moved aside as Parsons went to the door. He set the rifle against the wall, but it was noticeable that he did not move far away from it. As Parsons stepped into the opening there came the sound of galloping horses nearby. The young man leaned negligently against the cabin wall and watched five horsemen approach.

At their head was the big, iron-jawed Killian. Behind him were four hard looking riders, fitted better to grace the hide-out of an outlaw gang than the range of a rich, respectable rancher. The men pounded to a halt, Killian jerking his horse to its haunches as he swung from the saddle. He strode up to the door, stared at Parsons, and glanced past him into the interior of the cabin where Lem and Mrs. Carter were grouped behind the man they had befriended.

"What th' hell you doin' here, Parsons?" challenged the red-faced Killian.

Parsons grinned, but it was a tight-lipped smile.

"Reckon that's any of your damned business, Killian?" he asked quietly.

The big man's face became almost purple and his prognathous jaw was thrust even farther forward than usual.

"I reckon it is," he mimicked with elaborate sarcasm that failed to conceal his rising anger. "You nesters 've been warned to get out. Now, I reckon you got yourselves in uh hole. We trailed th' Tonto Rattler, silk shirt, fancy boots, red scarf, rattlesnake hat-band and all, right up to this hole o' yours Carter. Been trailin' him for two days. Now where is he? You got about one minute to answer."

Mrs. Carter turned away. Lem's face became expressionless, hard. He took a step nearer to his rifle. Young Parsons laughed into Killian's face, and the big man's punchers growled menacingly, and clustered behind their leader.

"Don't reckon any such man 's you describe 's been around this ranch for several months," Carter drawled slowly, his eyes narrowing slightly.

"Don't lie to me," thundered Killian.

Carter's eyes became two tiny points of black fire barely showing behind his slitted lids. His lean face assumed lines of granite hardness. He stepped up beside Parsons. One hand rested on the barrel of his rifle, just inside the door.

"Reckon you better swallow thet, Killian," he breathed softly.

"Dan, look!"

At the startled exclamation every man of the five whirled to turn his gaze in the direction indicated by the puncher's gesture. Young Lem was just leading the black stallion out of the stable, saddled and bridled for the trail.

"STRETCH!"

Killian and his men turned at the command. Charley Parsons was crouched just outside the door, and his forty-five menaced the men before him. A little of the color drained from Killian's red face as his hands were slowly raised.

"Charley Parsons—the Rattler," he whispered incredulously.

His men already had their hands up. A quick shift of his eyes told Parsons that Lem Carter was standing in the doorway, his rifle hip high, cocked, and covering the group before him.

"Separate, you, so I can watch you!" Parsons snapped.

The men shuffled apart.

"Lem, you keep out of this. It's my funeral. You'll only get into trouble."

" 'Funeral' is right," Killian rumbled with a bitter oath.

"Trouble, hell! You came to me for shelter. You're going to get it," Carter replied drily. "These men'll stay right here with their hands reachin' for th' moon, for half an hour after you leave. Get goin', Charley Parsons, or th'

Tonto Rattler, or whoever you are."

Muttering imprecations at the stubborn, loyal old nester, Charley edged around the group of men and backed to his horse. Swinging into the saddle, he whirled his mount, dashed behind the barn and dismounted. He stepped to a corner where he could view the front of the cabin and then whipped out his Colt.

"Carter," he called. "Drop that rifle, you damned fool. I mean it! They'll get you, sure, when I'm gone."

Already some of the men were almost imperceptibly lowering their arms. The nester would be able to get in only one shot with his rifle before the others would have their six-guns out.

The old man hesitated. His glance shifted toward the boy who was standing by the barn door, his eyes wide with excitement. The sound of a sob behind him reminded him of his wife. He realized that there was more at stake than just himself. The muzzle of his rifle dropped, and the hammer was lowered slowly.

"Get those hands up," Parsons rapped at Killian and his men.

"Young Lem, you get into the house."

The lad ran forward, making a wide circle around the group of men, and disappeared inside the cabin.

"Now, Carter, you go in and shut and bar the door."

The nester slowly backed inside, shut the door, and thudded a bar into place. Parsons waited a moment, while Killian and his men slowly turned around to face the ramshackle barn. Then, firing swiftly, he made six rapid shots spurt up the dust at the feet of the men in front of him. Springing back out of sight, he leaped to the back of the stallion and thundered away, keeping the barn between himself and his enemies.

"Come on! His gun's empty," Parsons heard the exultant cry of Killian, as he swung into the saddle, and there was a rush of the band for their mounts.

He had succeeded in drawing his enemies away from the people who had befriended him. For the time, at least, Carter and his little family were safe from the vengeance of the ruthless rancher.

With the thundering hoofs of his pursuers growing gradually fainter, he swung the black into the trail down which he had come the evening before. Here he let the stallion choose its own course. During the closing hours of daylight the day before he had had no knowledge of where he was or the direction in which he was traveling. He knew the black would take the back trail and concerned himself only with keeping ahead of the others until he was in familiar territory.

Toward noon he again entered the valley he had traversed twice in the last two days. The sounds of pursuit had long since died, yet he had no doubt that Killian and his men were still following his trail.

One of those men was a tracker. The fact that they had so closely followed him the day before was proof of this. Only by constant travel could he lose them. But he had no food, his injured arm was jumping again, and the little store of strength the rest had given him was being rapidly dissipated by his constant effort to keep going. He headed toward the nest of canyons leading to the mesa where was the pocket with its spring and little cave.

He was reeling in the saddle when he finally threaded his way through the belt of spruce and entered the pocket. Falling from his horse, it was only by gripping the pommel that he managed to stay erect. He rested for many moments while the patient black waited without moving. At last he succeeded in loosening the cinches and letting the saddle slip to the ground. He fumbled for some time at the bridle before he managed to get it off.

Then he staggered to the spring, stretched out with his face in the water and drank unhurriedly. At length he arose and made his way to his saddle. Wrapping himself in his blanket, with the saddle for a pillow, he dropped into

deep unconsciousness to the mournful howl of an old lobo back on the mountain slopes.

It was nearly noon when he stirred and sat up. He drew a small can of beans from a saddle pocket, cut the top open with his pocket knife, built a small fire and set the can close to the flames. When he had finished eating, he made no move toward traveling, but stared somberly into the dying fire. Once he raised his head in a listening attitude, but lowered it again and resumed his meditations.

Behind him, at the mouth of the pocket, the tops of the brush moved slightly. There was a faint rustle, almost too slight for the ear to detect. Parsons did not hear it. Again the tops of the brush moved ever so slightly, and at several different points. This time not even a rustle accompanied the movement.

"All right, you two-bit outlaw, h'ist 'em!"

Parsons stiffened, then raised his hands while he slowly pivoted. There was the tramp of feet, the cracking of brush, and Dan Killian with his four, hard-faced punchers stepped into the open. Three of the men, including Killian, covered Parsons. The leader's face was twisted in a savage grin of satisfaction.

"Thought we wouldn't figure you'd return to this place, eh? Well, it didn't take much trailin' after we saw your tracks turn into them canyons back there to figure where for you was headin'. Tie him up, boys."

Two of the men stepped forward, careful not to come between their partners' guns and the captive. One of them jerked some hide thongs from his pocket. The other snapped Parsons' Colt out of its holster and tossed it to Killian.

With savage twists, they jerked the captive's arms behind his back and lashed them at the wrists, the hide biting into the flesh. Parsons' face went white at the torture they inflicted on his wounded arm, but no sound escaped between his thin, set lips. They did not tie his ankles.

"Now you c'n lead us to that cash you took from old Ab Snathey, Mister Tinhorn Tonto Rattler," Killian growled, stepping forward menacingly.

Parsons stared up into the heavy face of the rancher. His own features were devoid of emotion; his lips still compressed in a straight line. His reply came from between clenched teeth.

"And you can go to hell."

Killian had holstered his gun. He took a quick step forward and swung a heavy fist. Tonto's head snapped back and blood oozed from between his cut lips. His head came up again. The eyes, vacant of expression for a second, resumed their cold regard of his captor.

"Stir up that fire! Make 'er hot," Killian roared, whirling around.

In a few moments bright flames were licking at the fresh dry wood thrown on the coals. Killian jerked Tonto's gun from the waistband of his trousers, unloaded it, and thrust its muzzle into the heart of the flames. His eyes gleaming with satisfaction, he once more faced the captive.

"In a few minutes you're goin' to get branded plenty, an' where it'll show. A row of circles along your forehead, an' one in each cheek 'll sure improve your looks. They say brandin' don't hurt a calf none, so you ain't got anything to worry about. Eh, nester?"

There was gloating exultation in the big man's voice. It was patent that he was pleased that Parsons had refused to divulge the information at his first request. He wanted an excuse to brand his captive, slowly, that he might watch him squirm. He turned back to the fire and raked the gun from the flames. Its muzzle glowed red.

Parsons' face had paled. The cords in his neck stood out and his jaw muscles bunched into knots. Yet he made no sound. Suddenly he stiffened, sat upright, and a peculiar light glowed in his eyes. His head was cocked a trifle to one side. The next instant he was again staring into Killian's red face.

The big man approached him slowly, a wide grin thinning his thick lips. The others crowded around. Betting had commenced among them. Each chose the number of brands that it would be necessary to sear before the captive would give in. One of the men, stepping up from behind, gripped him by the ears so tightly that it was impossible to move his head a fraction of an inch. Killian thrust the red muzzle close to the captive's forehead. Parsons stared into the eyes of his enemy. Then,

"I'll tell," he stated quietly.

There was an exultant howl from one of the men. The others cursed and one of them gave the captive a savage kick in the ribs. These men had wagered their money on his nerve. Apparently the reputed nerve of the Tonto Rattler had been much overrated.

"Well?"

There was disappointment in the snapped question, as well as an eagerness for the answer. Killian regretted he had not been given sufficient excuse to torture this man, but the recovery of the stolen money must have first consideration. Tonto slowly turned his head and looked toward the hidden mouth of the cave.

"Just beyond that spring, behind the bushes, is a little cave. You'll find the grip in there."

"Watch him," Killian commanded, striding past the spring and pushing his way through the bushes.

A moment later he was back with the satchel in his hand. He sat it down, unsnapped the catches, and opened it. The tightly packed currency was exposed and for a second the men stared at it. Then Killian forced it shut and arose to his feet.

"Well, let's get on with the next job, and then leave this place. Bring that horse, Sam. You, Pete, use his lariat. That tree'll do."

The man called Sam picked up the black's bridle and stepped up to where the animal was quietly feeding. The other man took Parsons' lariat and tossed one end, in which he had made a loop, across a huge branch of a cottonwood that jutted out about ten feet above the ground. The others jerked the captive to his feet and, as Sam brought up the black, hoisted him to the horse's back.

"Better tell me th' meaning of this, Killian. I've a right to a fair trial, you know."

"Fair trial? Haw! Haw! You know too damned much. I take no chances."

The rancher was enjoying himself now. He bent almost double and this time his face became red, not from anger, but from the violence of his mirth.

"I suppose that money's going back to Ab Snathey?"

Queer words for a man about to be hung, but this fact did not strike Killian.

"Yeah? Well, I don't mind tellin' you, 'cause you'll never live to spread it. We was ridin' out to meet Ab an' guard th' money into Flintlock when you held him up. Snathey was to get half. Depositors' money? Sure. That bank went broke because of some damned poor, unsecured loans; poor loans for the depositors."

The big man grinned at his joke, paused a moment, and then continued:

"The paper on them loans was made by friends o' mine and Ab's who later left th' country. They didn't get th' money, but th' books showed they did. The money that was supposed to be loaned out belonged to the depositors, nesters like yourself mostly, who had mortgages with th' bank. They won't be able to pay them mortgages. Result: Ab and I got th' money, and we'll have the ranches fast as th' mortgages come due."

"And I don't get turned over to Jack Tait because you guessed I knew Ab Snathey was on his way to you at Flintlock with that bunch of absconded money when I held him up. You're afraid of what I might tell?"

"C'rect. Ab won't even report the hold-up to th' sheriff. Let's go!"

While he had been speaking, the rancher had been leading the horse toward the cottonwood. He halted the animal beneath the wide-spreading branch and fitted the noose around his prisoner's neck, while one of the men drew the rope and fastened it to the trunk of the tree.

"Now, you damned nester, commence to pray. You got ten seconds before that horse jumps out from under you."

Dan Killian had had his joke. His hate once more ruled him. A thin smile played over the face of the captive. The next moment it changed to a chuckle, and then broke into a laugh. One of the men cursed. Parsons gestured with his head to a point behind Killian, toward the entrance to the pocket.

"What th' flaming hell's goin' on here?"

The big man whirled. A dozen men appeared at the edge of the brush. At their head stalked the man who had asked the question. A sheriff's star was pinned to his loose vest. The guns of the newcomers gave notice to Killian and his men that resistance was useless.

"Hear what he said, Tait?" Parsons asked.

"Yep! So'd my men. That Carter kid evidently just reached me in time. I got here about ten minutes ago."

Killian, the blood drained from his florid features, whirled around to face his captive.

"You knew he was there all the time?" he whispered.

Parsons nodded.

"Heard him coming when you were about to brand me. That's why I told you where the money was. You and your gang were too excited to hear. I was expecting them."

The big man muttered a single curse, then straightened. Some of the color was returning to his face. He turned to face the sheriff.

"Well, we ain't alone in this, anyway. Tait, this here jasper's th' Tonto Rattler. You'll find the clothes that proves it in a hole back of the spring. If I go to th' calaboose for robbery, which capturin' the Tonto Rattlesnake, who's wanted in four states, ought to prevent, this here jasper swings just th' same."

The sheriff snorted and then his slow smile answered the grin on Charley Parsons' face.

"Hell, Killian, th' Tonto Rattler was caught three days ago up in Whitewing County. Charley suspected two weeks back what you and Ab Snathey was up to. He's been actin' 's my deputy ever since. Now, cut th' palaver an' we'll take you for a long visit to your friend Ab at th' Gunther jail."

Read and Enjoy

THE BLOOD TRAIL

The Story of a Great Dog

By Howard E. Morgan

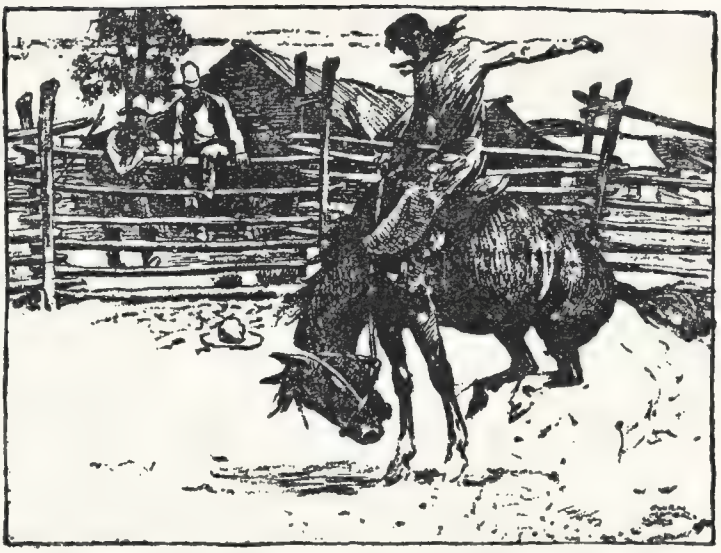
In the Next Issue—On Sale, August 8th

Ask For ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE By Name.

VICTIMS ALL

By

Glenn A. Connor



Thunderbolt, the man-hating stallion, was put into a special field, and everyone was warned not to go near him. Bailey, his owner, was the only man who could approach him, without the danger of being killed.

THERE are riders whose course, we may say, fate has shaped to the extent that they hold themselves invincible. Such a man was Alan Creed who, a few weeks prior to the opening of this story, considered himself top-hand of the Rocker Bar, located in the desert country of southern Arizona. No doubt his abilities had been appreciated there; we might have cause to surmise this very environment might be the indirect cause of this self laudation.

However that may be, Creed heard about the Rocker D even in that out-of-the-way place in Arizona, of its bad horses and Thunderbolt—Thunderbolt, the one-man horse, the man-killing stallion, was the magnet that had drawn Creed. He wanted to show the world in general and the Wyomingites in particular that Bailey, Thunderbolt's owner, was not the only one who could conquer the stallion. Conquering outlaws appeared to be Creed's pet hobby. He lost no time in setting out on this new conquest.

A MAN'S action is often a big mystery to himself. Why he had hired Creed puzzled Bailey as much as it did his riders. Creed's over-confident manner and conceited ways attracted only dislike and scorn. These simple, hardy riders whom Bailey had congregated about him, did not fear for their reputations or of their places being usurped. Their feelings toward Creed consisted mostly of disgust, a disgust that originated from the difference with which they and Creed regarded their profession.

Creed strived to conquer for the notoriety it gave him. The Rocker D riders accepted their business as all in the day's work. True, they loved to conquer; praise was sweet to their ears; if they rode an exceptionally bad outlaw they expected the customary tribute due to their success. But to seek the stars in their profession they showed little ambition. "Fame," was a popular saying with Bailey, "is like a bubble. It can be sent into oblivion by a pin prick." It may be this version of their boss had something to do with their lack of craving for distinction.

After due consideration, Bailey came to the conclusion that Creed's conceit had been the very cause of him hiring the Arizonan. If some of the Rocker D outlaws did not take the wind out of his sails, he would grant that Creed might indeed have cause for his self-praise.

AFTER a two weeks' tryout even the old Rocker D hands were compelled to admit that the Arizonan

was right there when it came to forking a bad horse. He rode with the same mocking grace that distinguished his attitude in general, but at the same time denoting little vicious traits that caused Bailey's eyes to narrow as he observed them.

As Sharkey, the huge gray, finally gave up its efforts to unseat his rider and started trotting about the corral, Bailey sidled over to his foreman's side. "I reckon Sharkey ain't th' buckin' hoss we thought he was," he muttered disappointedly. "I was hopin'—"

"So was I!" snorted Phil Young with feeling. "Pa, I don't like that hombre a damn bit!"

Neither did Bailey. But he had a notion to hear Young's opinion. "Yuh peeved 'cause he rode Sharkey?" Bailey made his words sarcastic with a purpose.

Young looked up quickly. "Hell, no!" he retorted somewhat defiantly. "Tommy an' Jerry both rode that hoss when he showed a damn sight more action than he did this mornin'. Put a flankin' strap on that hoss like we did when we exploded him with Tommy, an' he'd lose this man Creed in a hurry."

"Then why don't yuh like 'im?"

"Cause he don't follow out orders as given," snapped Young. "He does *what* yuh tell 'im all right enough, but not *like* yuh tell 'im tuh do it."

"What for instance, Phil?"

"Well, I sent him out for that bunch of fillies rangin' over on th' head of Wykoff Draw. I told him tuh bring 'em in by way of th' east range gate. What did th' dang fool do but bring 'em in through Thunderbolt's field!"

"Phil!" Bailey stared in consternation.

"He done just that, after me warnin' him in particular tuh stay out of that field. As luck would have it, yuh had Thunderbolt up here that day."

Bailey frowned at his foreman in perplexity. "Is this goin' contrary tuh orders a habit with him?" he demanded sharply.

Young hesitated uncertainly. "Pa, I hate like hell tuh say anything, me not likin' that hombre very strong. It looks like I'm tryin' tuh knock 'im."

"None a-tall, Phil," denied Bailey. "I know yuh got th' outfit's interest tuh heart. Spill yuhr little tale."

"I put that feller tuh breakin' out some of that young stuff th' other day for saddle horses. I told 'im tuh handle 'em gentle an' tuh ride 'em slick-heeled. Pa, I reckon he didn't do neither. When I got in that night I looked them colts over an' every danged one of 'em is carryin' rowel marks. There is several other instances where he didn't go accordin' tuh orders, that ain't worthy of mention. But I'll give yuh a tip. If yuh want tuh get th' dope why Creed is here, yuh better talk tuh Tommy. He's been cultivating Creed some strong, where th' rest of us ain't had much tuh do with him."

Bailey regarded his foreman keenly. He knew there was something vital behind the foreman's tip and meant to look into it without delay. "All right, Phil, I'll tend tuh Creed's hash. Now, you take th' rest of th' boys, an' round up that string of Bar Fours. Ol' Butch is in pretty hard shape, so I took 'em off his hands. You c'n put 'em in that thirty-six school section till yuh get 'em all gathered." He eyed Creed, who had now dismounted and was approaching them. "Just give that feller somethin' tuh do till I get ready for him. I reckon I'll go interview Tommy now."

BAILEY found Tommy in the bunkhouse sprawled upon his bunk, recovering from the recent effects of a too hard contact with Mother Earth from the back of a gyrating outlaw. Hearing the heavy tread of his employer's bootheels, Tommy managed to roll over and look up through eyes still somewhat dazed with sleep.

"He says he ain't afraid of th' devil an' c'n ride anything with four legs," mumbled Worthington sleepily.

"Hey! What's that?" demanded Bailey.

Worthington popped upright and stared at his boss. "Oh, hello, Pa! I guess I musta dozed off," exclaimed Tommy with an embarrassed grin. "Was yuh wantin' me?"

"I got a hankerin' for some information. Who was yuh talkin' 'bout when I come in?"

"Couldn't prove it by me," said Tommy, bewildered. "I musta been talkin' in my sleep. What'd I say?"

As Bailey repeated his words, Tommy grinned in comprehension. "Musta been that new waddy; he's been causin' me nightmares ever since he's been here."

"Just th' gent I want tuh talk about," declared Bailey, seating himself on the bunk beside the young rider. "What c'n yuh tell me 'bout him, Tom?"

"More'n yuh got time tuh hear," chuckled Tommy. "A little encouragment an' that feller opened up like a flag lily on a rainy day. I know more about him than I do of th' presidents of th' United States. 'Cordin' tuh his version, he's more wonderful than George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt an' Mary Pickford all put together. He toots his own horn without makin' a false note, an' if passin' th' bull was music, he'd make a whole brass band. What'll yuh have first?"

"What interests me direct."

Tommy appeared thoughtful for a minute. "I reckon that means about Thunderbolt," he murmured finally.

Bailey started, and stared intently at his rider. "Let's have it!" he snapped harshly.

Tommy shifted about uneasily. "I don't want yuh thinkin' I been hidin' this from yuh a-purpose," he commenced. "I was goin' tuh wait till th' time was ripe an' spill it out to th' whole gang; they bein' plumb in love with this Creed. I figgered it'd take him down a notch."

Bailey halted him impatiently. "Give us th' facts," he ordered shortly.

"Creed come here tuh give Thunderbolt th' low-down. He didn't make no bones of it tuh tell me he intended tuh show th' world in general an' us Wyoming buckaroos in particular that Bill Bailey wasn't the only hombre that could conquer Thunderbolt!"

"Well?" prompted Bailey.

"I figgered Creed a wind-bag that wouldn't do much but talk till Phil told me 'bout him takin' that bunch of young fillies through Thunderbolt's field. Then I told Phil what he told me, leavin' it up tuh Phil tuh do what he thought best."

"Has he ever made any attempt to approach Thunderbolt yet?"

"Not tuh my knowledge. But then I ain't had him in sight much of th' time."

Bailey arose and started toward the door. "I reckon I'd best send Creed driftin' right now," he muttered. He paused in the doorway to watch his riders trooping out of the corral gate, bound for the distant Bar Four. Creed stood regarding them through the bars of the corral, something in his attitude arresting Bailey's attention. But before he had time to consider the matter, his wife called from the ranch house that he was wanted on the telephone.

SOMETHING in the foreman's terse manner made Creed suspect that all was not well with his job with the Rocker D. The other riders' cold glances as they rode by him stimulated this feeling. Then memory of the earnest conversation between the foreman and Bailey, the unconscious glances of disapproval they had cast in his direction, still further strengthened the feeling. And his mission not yet realized!

Creed cared little for his job; they could be obtained at 'most any of the other ranches, once he made his reputation known. But to be compelled to leave before his ambition was filled was a blow that caused him a hot anger. He cursed bitterly in his dis-

appointment, vowing to even the score with Young, whom he was certain was the cause of his dismissal. His inability to conquer the stallion never entered his egotistical mind.

Creed's indignant thoughts were suddenly interrupted by Bailey shouting to him from the house. He gasped in relief as Bailey's words reached his ears.

"Saddle yuh up a hoss, Creed, an' get them mares in from th' north field. An' get a hustle on—th' hoss buyer left Brown's just now an' should be here in a couple of hours."

As Creed swung into the saddle and whirled his horse, Bailey intercepted him at the gate. "Creed," he snapped, "I want tuh impress one thing on yuhr mind. When *I* give orders, I expect 'em tuh be carried out to th' letter. I'm tellin' yuh tuh get them broomtails out of that north field, I'm tellin' yuh tuh bring 'em down that pass tuh th' east of Thunderbolt's field, an' then up on this side of the creek to th' corrals—*not through Thunderbolt's field!* Now get that straight!"

Creed nodded his head sulkily and attempted to ride past. But Bailey reached up quickly and grasped his horse by the bit. "I got a few more words tuh say to yuh," he growled. "I hear yuh got ambitions tuhward Thunderbolt. Feller, I'm tellin' yuh again what I told yuh when yuh drifted in here—*stay clear from that hoss!* He'll kill yuh!" Bailey stepped back and motioned with his hand.

Creed hesitated a brief fraction of a second, tempted to make a retort. Then he started on with a shrug of his shoulders. "Damn ol' woman," he muttered to himself. "'Fraid someone will make a hit with his pet."

Creed rode rapidly until he became lost to sight in the willows that lined the creek banks. Then he drew up and glanced back to make certain no one was in sight. A plan to startle the world had quickly formulated in his mind. He would catch up Thunderbolt and ride him after those mares. When he finally appeared at the corral—

"Doggone, I'll show 'em!" he swore ecstatically. "I'll probably get kicked off th' ranch for my nerve; but what th' hell do I care? I'll have showed 'em Alan Creed is some buckaroo!"

THUNDERBOLT, vicious, a one-man horse, reared from a colt upon the Rocker D, recognized but one master. Upon this one person fell all this horse's love, a love as strong as his master's kind. That this love should fall upon Bailey might be rightly explained by his understanding sympathy and great love for the dumb beasts he specialized in.

But Thunderbolt's affections were not won in a day or two, nor yet in a week. Only after weeks of tireless effort and undying patience did the ranchman realize victory. But the battle won, Bailey possessed that which all true horsemen most desire—a one-man horse!

With Bailey, Thunderbolt's affections for the human race ended. His intense hatred burst forth upon their mere sight. That he possessed all the instincts of a killer had already been demonstrated, for Thunderbolt had not long since claimed his first victim. But in spite of this all-consuming hatred for man, Bailey, by his mere presence, seemed to hold the horse in check from making any unwarranted attacks.

It being impossible for him to keep the stallion under constant observance, Bailey had a small field securely fenced, where no passers-by would be likely to venture. Here Thunderbolt was kept in solitary confinement.

And this was the horse that Creed presumed to ride!

Bailey stepped from the door of the ranch house for the third time and, shading his eyes from the glare of the sun, stared long and intently at the hills that represented his north pasture. A worried frown corrugated his brow as he continued to gaze and no moving object appeared upon the rolling hills. Then he turned to the west

and his eyes followed the gray trail that wound among the greasewood and sagebrush until it disappeared in the distance, along the low creek bottom. Finally a low ejaculation escaped his lips as he distinguished a moving dust cloud approaching in the distance along the many twistings and turnings of the trail.

Bailey dragged a heavy silver watch from his pocket. A glance at it caused him to curse softly and again turn his eyes to the north pasture. "That's th' horse buyer comin'," he muttered impatiently, referring to the rapidly approaching cloud of dust, "an' no sign of Creed comin' with them broomtails yet." Tommy Worthington appeared at the door of the bunkhouse at this instant, and Bailey motioned him over.

"Tommy, I reckon yuh better go see what's detainin' that man, Creed. I sent him after that bunch of mares in th' north pasture two hours ago an' ain't seen no sign of him since." Noticing Tommy's pronounced limp, Bailey remarked, "I hate like hell tuh send yuh, son"—Bailey's lips drew back in a sly grin—"yuh just recuperatin' from such a nasty spill, but all th' rest of th' boys is gone, so I reckon yuh're elected."

Tommy returned the other's grin somewhat sheepishly. "I reckon a tumble from that skyscraper ain't goin' tuh disable me permanent," he retorted. "But my laugh's a-comin', Pa. Just wait till some o' them Frontier boys tries tuh sit that Moonshine hoss. I bet he makes some of them waddies hunt leather."

Bailey nodded soberly. "I reckon he will, son. But right now we got something more important tuh talk about. If yuh feel equal tuh forkin' a saddle, I wish yuh'd hustle out there and help Creed with them mares. That hoss buyer'll be here in 'bout fifteen minutes, an' he's inclined tuh be an impatient sort o' cuss."

Tommy limped off with a reassuring wave of his hand. "We'll have 'em here in nothin' flat."

AS the horse buyer drove up to the ranch house he nodded curtly to Bailey, his eyes immediately seeking the corrals. When he noticed they were empty, he frowned impatiently. "Where's them horses yuh wanted me tuh look at?" he demanded bruskly.

"Fine day, Mr. Graves," greeted Bailey. Then, "Sorry, sir, but they're not in here yet. I sent a man out two hours ago tuh wrangle 'em an' ain't seen a sign of him since. Just now sent Worthington out tuh give him a hand; they should be here pronto."

Graves' frown grew blacker. "I told you what time I'd be here, Bailey. It seems as though you would have them horses up here for me if you were anxious to sell. My time is valuable, man, and I am in a hurry to be on my road. *I* try to keep my appointments at the time specified, and I am due at the Cross Seven at two this afternoon." The buyer's tone was both irritable and impatient.

Bailey controlled his own quick temper with difficulty. "I reckon yuh ought tuh see them mares, Graves, but if yuh're in such a hell-fired hurry, I guess yuh might as well drive on. I ain't never *begged* a man tuh buy a hoss from me yet."

Graves looked up in quick surprise. He was a sufficient student of human nature to recognize in Bailey a man as independent as himself. He saw resentment in the old man's face, and his attitude immediately changed. "Sorry, Bailey," he apologized gruffly. "I meant no offense. But truly, man, I am crowded for time."

Bailey's good humor instantly returned. "I reckon I savvy how it is," he answered, gratified, "an' I sure wish—"

Bailey broke off abruptly as he noticed a figure burst from the fringe of cottonwoods and willows beyond the creek. In the disheveled figure he recognized Tommy Worthington whom he had sent forth but a short half hour before. The foot he had resting upon the hub of the buyer's buggy dropped

to the ground and Bailey straightened up as from an electric shock. The first thought that occurred to him was Thunderbolt, and connected with it was disaster.

As Tommy drew nearer, the eyes of both men opened wide in amazement and horror. His left arm hung limp and useless at his side; the sleeve of his shirt was ripped in ribbons and stained crimson. His horse made a pitiful effort to keep up the speed his rider urged of him, but he, too, was sorely wounded and kept to his feet only by a visible effort. Bailey, torn between grief and doubt, rushed to the aid of his rider who was swaying precariously in the saddle.

"What is it, boy?" demanded Bailey fearfully, as he stared at Worthington's face, white and drawn with horror and pain.

"Thunderbolt—killed—Creed—" And Tommy tumbled into the ranchman's arms unconscious.

Bailey laid the rider tenderly upon the ground, a groan of agony escaping his lips. He had saved Thunderbolt once from a like deed, but now—Bailey shook his head sorrowfully, conscious he must make a sacrifice that would wring his very heart. He realized that Thunderbolt must pay the penalty of his second deed—humanity would demand it—and it broke his heart to think what the sacrifice meant to him.

Bailey whirled toward the horse buyer with face gray as chalk, and huskily commanded, "Help me carry this boy in th' house where Ma c'n look after him. Then turn yuhr team around an' we'll go get that feller!"

After they had laid Tommy out on Mrs. Bailey's own bed, Bailey took a thirty-thirty rifle from the wall and motioned to Graves to follow. At the door, Mrs. Bailey called him back. Bailey understood the cause as he saw Tommy straighten up on the bed. He stared dazedly at the ranchman until memory of the terrible circumstances recurred to him.

"I—tried tuh—save—what was left—of him," gasped Tommy painfully. "Thunderbolt—caught me—like a rat—in a trap. I was goin'—pick—Creed up—when he—charged. I just—had time—catch—m' stirrup—that devil—caught m' arm—nearly tore off," Tommy tried to explain between sobs.

"Creed! Yuh sure he's dead?" demanded Bailey shakily, clinging to a last forlorn hope.

"Dead?" cried Tommy, shuddering. "God, Pa—no man—could live—ground to th' pulp—he is!" Tommy closed his eyes in horror of the sight he had seen.

Bailey turned ghastly pale at the thought there was no hope for Thunderbolt to escape this time. He felt there was no sacrifice too great if it would save his friend's life. But he realized Thunderbolt must at last pay the penalty of his hatred for mankind, and the realization stabbed him like a knife.

As Bailey left the bedside of his injured rider, he staggered slightly and reached blindly for the thirty-thirty he had leaned against the doorway on entering. Mrs. Bailey laid a sympathetic hand upon his arm. But Bailey felt nothing, heard nothing, as he plunged blindly for the door. Ten minutes later he and Graves were driving rapidly for the scene of the tragedy.

AS Graves dragged his team to a halt before the gate that led into Thunderbolt's field, Bailey climbed out of the buggy with evident reluctance, his face aged ten years in the past ten minutes. He turned to the horse buyer and huskily ordered, "Stay here till I tell yuh tuh come." Then Bailey picked up his rifle and entered the field.

Graves stared after the ranchman's retreating figure with a strong mixture of emotions. "I've heard Bailey was completely wrapped up in that stallion, an' now I'm commencing to believe it. I never saw a man more affected—just like he'd received his own death sentence," he muttered to himself.

Graves watched Bailey stagger up the slope a quarter of a mile away, the rifle held loosely in the crook of his arm. Then he saw Bailey halt suddenly and turn half about. Following the direction of Bailey's gaze he made out a shapeless form but a short distance from where the ranch stood. Bailey hastened forward, and was soon bending over that shapeless heap.

Bailey's eyes narrowed to two pin points of flame as he began to recognize the circumstances that surrounded Creed's terrible end. A short distance from the mutilated body of the rider lay his saddle and bridle. Still clutched in the bruised and crushed hands was the lariat that plainly spoke Creed's intentions.

Raising his hands on high, Bailey brought them down with an explosive curse. "Oh, th' fool! Th' fool! My God, what did th' man mean!"

Gripped in an insane rage, Bailey rushed over to the saddle. Picking it up, he flung it far out into the brush with a violence wholly in accord with his feelings. The bridle followed suit in an opposite direction. Then he glared wildly about him for some other object to wreak vengeance upon.

A sudden squeal of terror, a crashing of brush, and the crazy passion in Bailey's eyes magically disappeared. Then the brush parted as a horse appeared, fleeing for his life. On the heels of the madly running horse came Thunderbolt, silent except for the gnashing of exposed, gleaming teeth, and the thunder of his flashing hoofs.

"Creed's hoss!" ejaculated Bailey, once more a man of purpose. "If Thunderbolt ever catches him—"

Bailey noticed the stallion was overtaking the other in great, ground-eating strides that spelled disaster for the little bay within the next hundred yards. Bailey's fingers jerked to his lips, and the next instant that well known whistle shrilled upon the air.

Thunderbolt heard and whirled about. Graves, watching with abated breath, was horrified to see Bailey fling his rifle aside as the stallion turned and came charging toward him. Without waiting to see the result, Graves sprang for the gate and flung it open. The next instant he had leaped into his rig and was dashing toward Bailey.

Thunderbolt slackened his pace abruptly as he drew alongside of Bailey. With tears of grief, Bailey wrapped his arms about the horse's neck, crying huskily, "Oh, boy—boy, why did yuh do it? Don't yuh know yuh've broke my heart, an' signed yuhr death warrant? I come out here tuh kill yuh, boy, but now I can't do ut. I just can't. 'Cause all this ain't yuhr fault! No, it ain't, ol' pard! I always made it a point tuh warn ever'body that run any danger of comin' in contact with yuh—an' that feller in particular," Bailey nodded his head in the direction of Thunderbolt's latest victim, "that yuh was a man-hater. He just laughed about ut tuh Tommy, an' said there weren't nary beast he feared. I warned him again tuh stay away from yuh. It's th' likes o' that's made yuh what yuh are."

Thunderbolt whinnied softly, as though he thoroughly understood his master's meaning. "An' now yuh got tuh die!" Bailey choked, and his arms tightened convulsively about the stallion's neck. "Yuh kot tuh pay th' penalty 'cause of th' damn fools in this world—"

Thunderbolt's ears suddenly pricked up as the rattle of the approaching rig penetrated his consciousness. The next instant he had broken from Bailey's embrace and was tearing toward the oncoming Graves, who had halted his team and was approaching afoot.

Bailey stared for an instant in paralyzed horror! "You fool—*you fool!*" he screamed, leaping for his gun. The stock barely touched Bailey's shoulder when it cracked!

Thunderbolt, his bloodshot eyes gleaming with the hatred that any other human than Bailey instilled in him, stumbled and fell in his mad charge almost at the feet of his in-

tended victim. Graves gaped dazedly at the dead horse.

Bailey came charging down upon him in a white fury that left him speechless. For a moment it appeared he intended violence upon the horse buyer's person as he glared at him, inarticulate.

"My God, man, that was a narrow escape!" breathed Graves.

Bailey broke loose with a torrent of abuse that caused Graves to recoil as from a charge of shrapnel. "You fool! Yuh damn rattle-brained idiot! Didn't I tell yuh tuh stay where I left yuh? What'd yuh mean comin' in here? Wasn't it warnin' enough to yuh he'd already killed one man this mornin'?"

Bailey's grief finally overcame his wrath. Sinking down by his side, Bailey took the bloody head in his lap, while shameless tears rolled down his seamed cheeks. "Thunderbolt! Boy! God forgive me! Yuh once saved my life! I know now what th' loss of a true friend means. But tuh take that life with my own hands— God, it's too much!"

There was true understanding and sympathy in Graves' manner as he laid a consoling hand upon Bailey's shoulder. "I'm sorry, old man, I didn't realize—"

Bailey looked up as he roared resentfully, "Didn't realize! No, yuh didn't —just like th' rest of th' damn fools. An' Thunderbolt—my pet—my best friend—" Bailey's lips curled back in cruel, bitter lines—"has tuh pay th' penalty 'cause yuh didn't understand!"

We Call 'Em As We See 'Em
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WEST OF PIUTE PASS

A SIX-PART WESTERN NOVEL

By J. Irving Crump

PART THREE

WHEN Gil O'Gara, the man with the iron hand and the owner of the Kettle outfit in the Hondo Lava barrens west of Piute Pass, closes the Kettle trail and insists that he is going to keep men and cattle out of the country west of the Pass, he little realizes the handful of trouble he has grabbed off. Clive Eddy, owner of the Staple D, backed by a group of honest ranchers of Sacco County, objects to his control of the barrens, as he objects to him personally and to his candidate for sheriff, Bender Erps. Eddy and the ranchers also object to the gang headed by Rex Castor which he shelters in the barrens and which backs his dirty plays at every turn.

They show their objections first by defeating Erps for the office of sheriff and electing to the job Silent Terry Shannon, Clive Eddy's foreman. Then they decide to break O'Gara's control of the country west of Piute Pass by sending a trail herd down the old Kettle trail in defiance of him and the Castor gang. Iron-hand O'Gara does not want men or cattle going through the Hondo country for some secret reason, and to show his resentment toward Clive Eddy, he sends three killers into the cowtown of Segundo to get old Clive. His men, Cigarette Evans, Hammer-head Healy and Greasy Cunado come into town during a norther, kill Clive Eddy, who is loved by all, including Silent Shannon, and try to escape. But thanks to the warning of Mabel Turner, the daughter of Thumpin' Billy Turner who has mysteriously disappeared in the country west of Piute Pass, Shannon is able to apprehend them and, at the point of a gun, put them into jail in Segundo.

O'Gara and his supporters, Rex Castor and his gang, are incensed at this. They determine to discredit Shannon as sheriff and show him up by making

a hell hole out of Segundo, releasing the prisoners and cleaning out the town. O'Gara sends Castor and his gang into town during Clive Eddy's funeral, and after terrific fighting they gain possession of the upper end of the town. Shannon, young Boots Eddy, Clive's son, and a handful of men are besieged in a lunch room. Lead flies thick and fast, sweeping the streets of Segundo, with the battling about even until Mabel Turner braves disaster to herself by crossing the main street of the town under fire and, despite the fact that she is wounded, for the third time warns Shannon, this time that Rex Castor and his gang have secured dynamite and are about to blow out the front jail wall to rescue the three assassins.

The fighting becomes terrific after that, with Shannon and his men charging up the street toward the jail from the restaurant, supported by men from the Navajoe Hotel and other points of vantage down the street. But Castor's men have built a barricade across the street up near the jail and, while most of the gang tries to hold back the sheriff's men with rifles, others strive to dynamite the jail. The fighting is of a terrible nature in which many are wounded, including young Boots Eddy. In the end, despite all that Shannon can do, the dynamite is exploded, the front of the adobe jail is demolished and the prisoners are rushed out of town and back to the lava country west of Piute Pass, the gang's refuge.

With a feeling that O'Gara has run a blazer on him and that with the help of the Castor gang he has thoroughly discredited him, Shannon surveys the shambles that has been the cowtown of Segundo, and resolves to go through the country west of Piute Pass and clean it out, get O'Gara and Castor, and try to find out the secret of the lava barrens.

Many of the sheriff's supporters and friends have been wounded and are confined to rooms in the Navajoe Hotel which has been turned into a hospital. Boots Eddy is down there, being cared for by Mabel Turner who has become the chief nurse in the improvised hospital. But when Shannon goes to visit him, he finds that Boots has gone, leaving a note in which he announces that he is going into the country west of Piute Pass himself, to get O'Gara and Castor and the men who killed his father. He also intends to revenge the death of Mabel Turner's father.

This is obviously a foolhardy thing for a fifteen-year-old boy to do, but Boots has no fear. Late at night he crosses through the pass and travels the spooky lava country until dawn when he hides in an old pueblo built among the lava cliffs. Here he meets a madman; a truly horrible looking creature who is unquestionably a lunatic, made so by the fact that at some time his skull has been crushed in by being hit with some hard weapon. The pressure of the shattered bone on his brain has made him almost a brute. The fiend believes that he is Billy the Kid and that Boots is Pat Garrett, come to arrest him and take him to jail. He leaps at Boots and, despite the boy's frantic though futile efforts to fight him off, finally lifts him from the ground and hurls him across the pueblo room, knocking him unconscious.

CHAPTER X

Grinning Skulls

THE blow on the head, that Boots Eddy had suffered in his encounter with Cholo Porter when the Castor gang attacked Segundo and dynamited the jail to liberate the three members of the gang that Silent Shannon held prisoners there, had not been severe in itself. It was a ragged scalp wound which Mabel Turner, nursing him in the improvised hospital in the Navajoe Hotel, had closed with adhesive plaster. It had hurt him a lot during his long nocturnal ride into the Hondo lava country, the stronghold of the

Castor gang, where he had gone in an over-enthusiastic, singlehanded effort to get the three killers and incidentally find out anything he could of the fate of Mabel Turner's father. But he would unquestionably have survived the wound without further unpleasantnes had he not encountered the madman in the Indian ruins where he had planned to hide and sleep during the hours of daylight.

It was fortunate indeed that Boots had twisted in the air and managed to break the force of his fall by landing on his feet and knees in the corner of the adobe room where the madman hurled him; otherwise he would have been killed. As it was his head was snapped backward against the wall. This second blow on the same spot reopened the wound and once again made him unconscious.

How long he remained in this condition, Boots could not tell. For an extended period he was completely oblivious of everything. Then for a longer time he seemed to be in a strange borderland between consciousness and unconsciousness. During these intervals he was aware of the fact that he was being half carried, half dragged down long passages; sometimes dark, sometimes lit with a strange weird illumination that came from above. His big, hairy adversary, the madman, was carrying him; Boots wondered vaguely what he intended to do with him. But before his befogged intellect could shape possible answers to this question, or before he could seem to muster up enough vitality to try to squirm out of the madman's grasp, he would lapse into unconsciousness again.

He came to when he felt himself being laid down on something that felt like a bed of straw. But when he opened his eyes he could not be sure whether he was dead and had passed on into some chamber of horrors or whether he was in the throes of a horrible nightmare, so unreal were his surroundings. All that he could see were grinning skulls and death masks staring at him, against a black background ghastly illuminated by the fitful flicker of a fire.

Beyond the fire, watching him, was the great, hairy individual whom he had encountered in the pueblo, the firelight gleaming on the big, ugly scar on his forehead. Boots closed his eyes again and tried hard to reason out some answer to the question of where the madman had brought him. But his tired brain refused to function and presently he dozed off into a long and restful sleep.

It was someone stirring about that awakened him from his slumber, and it was the appetizing odor of cooking that aroused him to full, clear headed consciousness and caused him to sit up.

He was still in that chamber of horrors. It was a huge cave, its far walls lost in the blackness on all sides. It was hideously decorated with skulls and weird masks and mummies. The fire was burning on a rude hearth, and beyond the fire still crouched the figure of the hairy one. He was cooking something on a stick, over a pile of live coals scraped from the main fire, while a big Indian pottery jug in the fire itself gave off appetizing odors of something that smelled like stew.

As Boots stirred and sat up, the madman looked up and stared across the firelight at him, his face wrinkled in a worried frown. Boots studied him for a moment. Who was he, he wondered, and why had he attacked him? Also, now that he had made him a prisoner, what did he plan to do with him? Such were the thoughts that leaped to young Eddy's mind.

At the same time he became aware of the fact that he was not fettered. The madman had not tied him hand and foot. This gave him hope. Instinctively his hand went to his hip. But his fingers encountered an empty holster. The buck-horn handled six-gun that had belonged to his father, and that he had brought along with

him to kill his father's assassins, lay beside the madman. Boots saw the firelight flicker on its polished metal surface.

The hairy one saw Boots glance toward the weapon. He reached down with one hand and picked it up. A moment he held it in the palm of his hand and studied it; then, turning it over, he looked at the engraved bridge between the buck-horn handles.

This interested him so much that he put the spitted remains of several rabbits he was cooking on a hot slab of rock beside the fire; then apparently forgetting about Boots, he studied the engraving, repeating over and over again his father's name.

"Clive Eddy—Clive—Eddy—Clive—Segundo—Staple D—"

It was like a slowly awakening memory. Had this man known his father? The thought flashed through Boots' mind that perhaps he had. He knew the name of his father's ranch. He knew the cowtown of Segundo. His father's buck-horn handled gun with his name engraved upon it seemed to be recalling something to him. Could he have seen that gun before? Was it possible—

Memories suddenly flooded back to Boots Eddy too. That six-gun had been presented to his father by the town of Segundo. It had happened when Boots was away in school. But he had heard the story. His father had headed a vigilante committee that had rid the town of Segundo of a coterie of gamblers and killers from Texas. In grateful acknowledgement of his services, the town had presented him with this engraved Colt when the vigilantes had disbanded. And Thumpin' Billy Turner had made the presentation!

The last thought flashed through young Eddy's mind like an electric shock. Could this man be Thumpin' Billy Turner—Mabel Turner's father—the oil locator who had gone into the Hondo country and had never been heard from?

Boots stared hard at the big man. He began to see him in a different light. He just remembered Turner before he went away to school, he had seen him around the cowtown. He began to recognize him in spite of his disfigured countenance and wild covering of beard and shaggy hair. He was Thumpin' Billy Turner, Boots was certain! The man was still studying the engraving on the six-gun and muttering the name of Clive Eddy.

Boots spoke to him.

"You knew my father, Clive Eddy, didn't you? Were you a member of the old vigilantes in Segundo? You are Thumpin' Billy Turner, Mabel Turner's father, aren't you?"

At the mention of the name Turner, the madman looked up with a start and stared hard at Boots.

"Turner—Turner—Thumpin' Billy—Mabel Turner—Good Gawd, she's my daughter. I'm her father. I'm Thumpin' Billy Turner!" he exclaimed leaping to his feet, a strange rational glow coming into his eyes for a moment. "I'm Billy Turner—I'm Billy Turner—yes I am—I ain't Billy the Kid—no I ain't—no I'm—"

The wild light suddenly came back to his dark eyes again. His face twisted as in pain. He stood for a moment with hands outstretched as if reaching and groping in the dark for something that was fleeing from him. Then suddenly he fell into a crouch and a strange, crafty, animal-like expression came over his face as he stared at Boots Eddy with glowing eyes.

"I'm Billy the Kid," he snarled, "and yuh're one of 'em—yuh're one of Pat Garrett's men. Yuh come to get me, didn't yuh? Damn yuh, I'm gonna tear yuhr heart out an' send it back to Pat Garrett wrapped up in yuhr shirt!"

He seemed suddenly to forget about the six-gun. Dropping it, he kinked his fingers and, with great arms hanging ready to grapple with Boots, he started advancing on him across the cave. Boots, his heart almost stopping with fear, saw him again as he had seen him in the Indian pueblo when he was

slipping up behind him. He was a hideous, insane creature bent on killing him.

For a moment Boots shrank from him, eyes staring in horror, a cry on his lips. The man had suddenly gone mad again. He believed he was Billy the Kid. He thought Boots was one of his many enemies. He was going to kill him this time. Unarmed, Boots realized that he stood little chance against this hairy giant. He was drawing nearer. He was getting ready to leap at him, to pin him down and strangle him to death. He intended to tear his heart out!

With a cry Boots leaped to his feet.

"No! No!" he yelled. "You're Billy Turner—Thumpin' Billy Turner! You have a daughter, Mabel Turner—she's in Segundo now looking for you. She thought Gil O'Gara had killed you. You are not Billy the Kid. Billy the Kid is dead long ago! You are Billy Turner! Don't you remember Clive Eddy of Segundo? I'm Clive Eddy's son, Boots Eddy. Gil O'Gara had my father murdered."

With the first mention of the name Turner, the madman halted and suddenly stood erect. The wildness vanished from his face and the insane light disappeared from his eyes. A moment he seemed to be groping again. But as Boots snapped out the name of Gil O'Gara, a strange convulsion seemed to suffuse the man's ponderous form. He shivered and his hands went instinctively to his head, his fingers touching the great livid scar in his forehead.

"Gil O'Gara," he muttered. "Gil O'Gara—damn him—he hit me. Hit me here—with that hellish iron hand of his. Stove in my skull. Gawd, how it hurts sometimes! I'd have killed him — I will kill him—some day— Yes—yes, I'm Billy Turner—I remember—I remember— Things come back to me. Mabel Turner—my daughter—Clive Eddy—Segundo—the vigilantes—Help me, boy—help me remember. If you are Clive Eddy's son, don't let me slip off into the dark again. I've been in the dark a long time. Help me, boy—help me."

There was something appealing in the old man's voice that got to Boots Eddy's sympathetic nature.

"Yes. I'll help you. Sit down on that rock there, that's it. Here, try to remember. You are Billy Turner. Here, look at this six-gun. See, that's my father's name engraved there—Clive Eddy. Remember him? He was my father. Remember the vigilantes? Clive Eddy was the leader. You gave him this six-gun. You presented it to him," said Boots talking as fast and as forcefully as he could, trying his hardest to keep the man's mind in rational channels.

The old man nodded. His head was in his hands and his elbows rested on his knees as he sat on a lump of lava.

"I remember. Things come back. I've been livin' in the dark a long time—a very long time, I guess. I remember a lot of things now. I went into the Hondo country west of Piute Pass. Boy, I made a discovery. I found oil—that's it, oil. Then that gang came into the lava country. Gil O'Gara and Rex Castor and the rest. I fought them single-handed—gave 'em hell. They tried to jump my claims. I had six good oil claims staked out. I remember th' fight. They surrounded my cabin in th' valley, by th' river. We fought for three days. Then they busted in. I fought them off. I killed a couple. But they got me down. Then that devil Gil O'Gara hit me in th' head with that iron hand of his—there, right in the forehead. It hurts a lot sometimes. I feel pressure—something pressin' on my brain. When it presses too hard, then the darkness comes on. I've lived in th' dark for a long time. Sometimes it gets light. I remember then.

"I escaped somehow and got away. I hid up here in the caves. I've watched the gang from here. I can see 'em from the caves. They never see me. I'm too slick. I've scared some of 'em stiff. They think th' caves are haunted. Sometimes I roll skulls down th' moun-

tain into their camp. I sneak down there at night and steal their supplies and bollox up their drills. I've killed a couple, too. Two of 'em had th' nerve to come up here into th' caves to find me. I strangled both of 'em an' drug their bodies back into their camp at night an' left 'em there with a Injun skull on their chests. None of 'em ever had th' guts to come up in th' caves again.

"I been watchin' 'em all th' time, too. They've drilled wells. They've tried to develop my claims. But they ain't struck oil—not yet. They ain't gone deep enough. They're fools. They don't know how to shoot a well. I've been stealin' their dynamite. I've got a heap stacked up in th' caves. Someday I'm gonna sneak down on 'em an' blow up their damned camp. Then I'll shoot a well an' make it come in. I know how. I didn't spend years in Texas for nothin'!"

Boots was staring hard at the old man. He wondered whether he was rambling again or whether he was rational. There was such a thin borderline between sanity and insanity in his case apparently.

"You've been watchin' th' gang—yuh mean th' Castor gang?" he demanded.

"Yeah, I've been watchin' 'em—from th' caves. C'mon boy, I'll show yuh."

The old oil locator got up to go, but Boots protested.

"No, wait. I'm hungry. So are you. Let's eat."

Turner had forgotten about the food, but Boots hadn't. He was famished. He had not eaten for nearly twenty-four hours. The old man turned back to the fire. It had burned low. He heaped on fagots of piñon pine and removed the pottery bowl. Then he found some wooden spoons. He warmed the broiling saddles of rabbit, and presently he and Boots were eating. The old man was silent, evidently thinking.

Boots watched him for a while for fear he might slip off into another period of violent madness. That his mind was badly warped was evident. Probably the shattered bone of his forehead was pressing on his brain and he would never be really normal again until that bone was removed by an operation. But he seemed to be growing stronger mentally and Boots began to feel a little easier, although he realized that Turner might go mad again at any moment and turn on him.

Surreptitiously Boots got possession of the Colt that Turner had dropped on the floor of the cave. Its touch gave him a great sense of security, although he was afraid that he could never bring himself to the point of killing Mabel Turner's father even though his life might depend upon it.

His story was clear to Boots now. Turner had found the oil that he had come into the Hondo country to discover. O'Gara and the Castor gang had jumped his claims and tried to kill him. Perhaps they even left him for dead in his cabin. But he got way and hid from them in the Indian ruins where he had been living almost a wild man for years.

Boots began to take an interest in his surroundings. The cave was indeed a horror chamber. Only a madman could live there. It was a great hole in a mountain of lava. It reminded him of the inside of a huge air bubble that probably formed when the lava was cooling thousands of years ago. It had evidently been used by the Indians as a burial place. There were hideous, dried out Indian mummies; terrible apparitions of bone with the dried parchmentlike skin shrunken over them, leaning against the wall. Others had fallen to the floor and crumbled.

Still others sat in hunched positions with their arms wrapped about their knees as they stared horribly with their sunken eyes. There were skulls, too, resting on shelves, some with fragments of leathery skin and wisps of black hair clinging to them. There were grotesque Indian masks of all hideous shapes and colors hanging from the walls, terrible things meant to

scare out the devils who might have the courage to invade this chamber of horrors.

Turner looked up in time to see Boots staring at the gruesome occupants of the cave. He smiled.

"Injun buryin' cave. I've lived here a long time, I reckon. This here mountain and my valley out yonder is full of Injun caves and ruins. I've explored a heap of 'em. I'm grateful for 'em too, let me tell yuh. They've provided food for me for a long time."

"Food?" exclaimed Boots.

"Yes. Look yonder. Them big Injun jugs. They're full of dried corn and beans and peas. Hundreds of years old, I reckon, but as good as th' day it was harvested. That's what yuh're eatin' in that stew. I just soak 'em in water and in twenty-four hours yuh wouldn't know it was older'n you are. There's caves in this here mountain, crammed full o' food like that. They all joined together by passageways. I can travel for miles, I reckon, under ground an' come out in 'bout five different valleys.

"C'mon. I'll show yuh. I'll show yuh how I can watch that Castor gang too and steal their dynamite. I'm gettin' a hoard of it. Some day I'm gonna blow their camp to hell an' get my claims back again. I'm just waitin' and watchin' for my chance, an' it's gonna come soon, you mark my word," said the old man, a fierce glow lighting his eyes for a moment.

But it disappeared instantly as he got to his feet and, taking a brand from the fire, blew it to flame. Then, with this as a torch, he led the way toward the dark entrance of a passageway out of the cave. Boots hesitated only long enough to inspect his six-gun and slip it into his holster, before he followed.

CHAPTER XI

The Dynamite Thief

THE lava mountain was honeycombed with these strange caves. Some were connected by natural passageways, and others were joined by tunnels that had been cut out of the flinty rock through human ingenuity. Evidently the Indians in ages past had joined the caves together in a strange, far reaching labyrinth. The burial cave was the largest they traversed, but there were others nearly as large; and as Boots inspected them by the light of the torch he could see how they had been formed.

The lava had run over the edge of a great wall of natural rock, and where it flowed over the edge of the precipice as it cooled, it had left an air space much as there is an air space behind a curtain of water flowing over a dam. Some of these caves were completely walled in. Others were open to daylight where the lava had cracked in cooling. Still others had very large openings looking out into the open air where there had been a break in the curtain of cooling lava that had flowed over the cliffs, or where canyons or gullies had interrupted the flow.

From these openings, which were high up on the side of the lava mountain, Boots could look over vast stretches of the spooky Hondo lava country. Hills, valleys, canyons and mountains of black, green and red rock with buttes and needles and ragged upflung masses of rock showed up in the weird half light of gathering dusk. Boots was surprised to observe that night was coming on. He had been in the caves since dawn. But most of the time he had been unconscious or asleep. His head still hurt him a lot but he felt stronger since he had eaten.

On they pushed through passageways of varying sizes from one cave to another, Turner in the lead. Presently he extinguished the light he carried.

"We make a bend here an' come out in some open caves. They could see th' light from th' oil camp so we gotta travel without it. Yuh gotta be slick —very slick, boy," said Turner, a mad fire glowing in his eyes as he extinguished the brand.

Through Stygian darkness they

groped their way down a series of passages, Boots keeping as close to the madman as possible. But presently it grew a trifle lighter in the caves, and ahead Boots could see where the one they were traveling, opened into the outer air. Out ahead he could see the star-powdered sky. Dusk had given way to growing night.

They emerged into what appeared to be an open gallery that ran along the side of the lava mountain. In the cold starlight the narrow valley below them seemed a land of weird shapes. Strange rock formations and heavy shadows loomed up against white desert sand in the valley. It was a horseshoe shaped basin, apparently surrounded by high mountains.

At the far end of the basin, Boots could see the starlight gleaming on what appeared to be a sluggishly flowing river. Up ahead, at the foot of the mountains, in the curve of the horseshoe, he could vaguely see gaunt oil derricks reared against the mountain. He could see masses of drilling machinery, and as far as he could judge, nearly a dozen buildings. Lights glowed down there through the windows of the largest of the group of structures and Boots knew that he was looking down on the oil camp that Turner had told him about.

The madman became tense with suppressed excitement. He hissed over his shoulder at Boots: "Follow me an' be slick, boy. Damn yuh, be slick—if yuh give us away I'll kill yuh!"

There was a husky quality about his voice and a certain fierceness about the look he shot back at Boots, that struck terror to young Eddy's heart. What if Turner should suddenly turn on him? What would he do? What could he do? His hand instinctively went to the buck-horn handle of the six-gun at his hip, but he knew that he could not shoot the madman, knowing now that he was Mabel Turner's father.

But Turner's fierce interest was all concentrated on the oil camp in the valley below. He moved with a soft pantherish tread along the gallery, to the end, chose a perilously narrow path to another ledge of lava below him, followed this for a little way around a slight shoulder of the mountain and stopped on the narrowest part of the ledge to wait for Boots to come up with him.

"Be slick, boy. Don't make a sound. Mebby we'll bust down on that gang to-night an' blow 'em to hell. We could do it, you an' me, with all th' dynamite I got hid yonder," he rasped.

Boots felt uncomfortable. In the first place Turner had halted on a very narrow strip of ledge. Looking below, Boots realized that it was almost a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the valley. They had to cling to the ledge like flies. It was not a comfortable place to stop.

Then, too, Turner's talk about dynamite worried him. A madman handling dynamite did not seem to Boots to be the safest sort of a combination, and he began to wonder what would be the outcome of this strange expedition.

Turner slipped stealthily around the shoulder of lava, found another ledge, moved along this for a short distance and then entered a big open cave. Boots reached his side with a sigh of relief. Those slippery ledges had not been to his liking.

"Th' dynamite is over there—that cave yonder," said Turner pointing along the face of the mountain. In the darkness, Boots could see that the lava slope was pock-marked with scores of caves and potholes. The whole side of the mountain looked like a giant section of honeycomb, and he could understand how Turner had been able to watch the oil camp in security from any one of a hundred different hiding places.

The madman started forward again. He followed a serpentine trail from one cave to another and from one pothole to the next, sometimes climbing, sometimes dropping down the slope, until he gained the cave he had been trying to reach.

It was slightly larger than the rest of the caves on the slope and across the opening was a veritable rampart of lava that formed an ideal breastworks. Moreover, the cave commanded the entire pock-marked slope of the mountain below, all the way down to the oil camp, the nearest buildings of which were built close against the base of the mountain.

Turner began to laugh, a strange cold chuckle that made Boots shudder.

"We can blow 'em to hell, boy. Look-it th' dynamite. C'mere."

He moved back into the cave. Boots followed him. There, laid out in rows, was the madman's dynamite cache—dozens of sticks of the devilish yellow stuff, all primed. He had stolen a lot of the explosives from the oil camp. He seemed to take a strange, childish joy in his achievement. He had stolen other things too. He had drills, sledges and a lot of tools. The hoard looked like the cache of a magpie. Boots could not help smiling at the childish pride the madman took in his ability to steal from the gang.

"Doggone, yuh're a rootin'-tooter when it comes to puttin' it over on that bunch. Yuh could pretty near steal their eye teeth, I reckon," said Boots, feeding the man's pride with praises.

Turner laughed softly. He was immensely pleased with himself.

He moved forward to the entrance of the cave and lying flat looked down the slope.

"That's their powder house yonder—that cabin right down there closest to the mountain. That's where they keep th' dynamite and where they make their nitroglycerine by boilin' down th' sticks. Some day I'm gonna sneak down there an' throw a bunch of sticks on th' roof of the powder house an' blow up th' works. An' if—"

Turner stopped talking suddenly and listened. Boots, who had slipped up beside him and was peering down into the valley, had also heard the sound that had arrested Turner's attention. Horses were moving down there. Riders were coming into the valley. Boots presently made out the forms of three horsemen coming from the direction of the river. One, mounted on a white horse, stood out against the darkness more than the others.

Turner suddenly clutched Boots' shoulder.

"It's Iron-hand O'Gara. He always rides a white hoss. I know his voice. That's him talkin' now. He's comin' to camp. By Gawd, to-night's th' night we blow up th' works an' get O'Gara too. We'll sneak down to one of those pot-holes an' from there we can throw a bunch of sticks down on th' powder house an' blow up th' hull place. I'm gonna do it now," rasped the gusty Turner eagerly, as he started to get up.

Boots grabbed his arm and restrained him.

"Wait," he urged. "Wait. Don't be in a hurry. Yuh ain't sure of gettin' O'Gara, by throwin' sticks of dynamite thataway. Let's sneak down an' meb-by I can get a shot at him. Mebby I can get Cigarette Evans an' th' other two birds that beefed my ol' man too. Doggone, wouldn't it be one on Shannon if I could blot out all four of them hombres? I guess he'd figger I was somethin' more than just a kid then. Let's try it. An' if it gets too warm for us down there we can beat it back and climb up here an' keep those suckers from gettin' up to us by throwin' dynamite down at 'em. How about it, fellah?"

Turner's eyes glowed. "Yeah, let's make sure of him. I'll go down with yuh an' strangle a couple."

Boots was not sure he liked Turner's last suggestion. He was willing to go down alone and take his chances on getting a shot at the killers or Gil O'Gara, but to have the madman with him was quite a different matter. Turner might go hay-wire all of a sudden while they were down there and try to mix it with the entire gang. Boots knew that would be fatal.

On the other hand, if he remonstrated with Turner and persuaded him

to wait up in the cave, Boots was not sure but what he might go off in one of his wild frenzies up there and begin throwing dynamite sticks down from the cliffs. That would not be so good either.

Boots was in a quandary. Unpleasant thoughts raced through his mind while Turner, crouching on the lava ledge in front of the cave, watched and waited until the horsemen traveling the valley reached the oil camp.

The riders stopped in front of the largest cabin in camp which was unquestionably the bunkhouse. Through the clear night air, Boots and Turner could hear their voices as they dismounted, despite the fact that they were several hundred feet below and a considerable distance away.

When the door slammed behind them after they had entered the big cabin, Turner hissed to Boots to follow him and started eagerly down the mountain. Again he moved like a panther, picking a narrow, winding and sometimes decidedly perilous path from ledge to ledge and from one lava pocket to another down the steep slope. He moved almost soundlessly, his bare feet making practically no noise on the smooth lava. Boots followed him cautiously. The height and the steepness of the descent made him giddy. He was also considerably worried about what Turner would do when they reached the valley.

At the foot of the slope, Turner crouched behind some lava boulders and waited until Boots came up.

"Lemme go ahead, Turner," suggested Boots. "I've got th' gun. I'll sneak up to th' bunkhouse an' look in. If th' suckers I want are there, I'll get a couple of 'em. Then we can beat it back up th' mountain an' hide out, or stand 'em off with that dynamite. We can hold 'em off forever flingin' that stuff down th' mountain."

To young Eddy's surprise the madman assented to the plan.

"All right, you go first, boy—go first and make a sure job of O'Gara. Wish I'd of brought some dynamite down with me so's I could fling a coupla sticks through th' bunkhouse winder," muttered Turner.

Boots took the lead then. With gun drawn ready for action, he started up the valley, keeping close to the foot of the mountain and making practically no noise as he crept from one lava boulder to another. Presently he reached the shelter of a cabin made of alamo logs that was the powder house. It was the nearest of the group of buildings. Here he paused to study the situation while Turner crouched beside him.

There was a long open space to cross, with an oil well derrick the only shelter, before they reached the bunkhouse. He decided to lay a course for the well derricks, pause there a moment, then scuttle across to the side of the bunkhouse and work his way around to one of the rear windows.

He started forward, but a hiss from Turner stopped him.

"Wait a minute, boy. I can git some more dynamite—in here—I know how to git in." His childish interest in stealing dynamite dominated everything else for the moment. "I could fling a stick or two through th' bunkhouse winder an' exterminate 'em all," he added.

Boots slipped back into the shadow of the powder house again and, crouching beside Turner, protested vigorously.

"No. No. We don't need it. I'll fix th' suckers with my six-gun. C'mon, follow me an'—"

Young Eddy stopped talking suddenly and, leaping up, whirled around. At the same time there was a scurry of feet in the sand and Boots, as he turned, beheld a dark figure as it launched itself out of the darkness at him. So swift and unexpected was the attack and so unprepared was Boots Eddy for it that, before he could brace himself and fully level his six-gun, the hurtling form crashed into him. He went down solidly as he pulled the

trigger of his weapon. A dirty oath followed and the weapon was wrenched from his hand. The next instant a heavy fist crashed solidly against the point of his jaw, dazing him momentairly, while the man who grappled with him yelled lustily.

"I got one of th' buzzards. Grab that other one, Butch, grab him! They're th' hombres that's been stealin' our dynamite."

The dizziness of that punch on the jaw lasted only momentarily with Boots. He began to fight fiercely to throw off the man who pinned him down. He kicked and squirmed and lashed punches upward into the ugly face that glared down at him, and meanwhile he was aware of another and more violent struggle going on nearby.

"Hell's hinges, Ed, I've tackled a range bull here. Help me—help—I can't hold him. He's—eawk-k-k!"

Turner was making it pretty tough for the man who had tackled him. It sounded as if he had clamped his vice-like grip on his adversary's throat and was strangling him to death. This gave Boots Eddy courage. He began to fight harder, twisting and squirming fiercely in an effort to throw off the weight of the man who had seized him and was trying to pin him down. And for a moment it looked as if he might succeed in freeing himself. Indeed, the man who had tackled him began to yell fiercely for help, too, as he clung desperately to the threshing Boots.

Young Eddy fought his way to his knees. He was trying to struggle to his feet and break the grip of the two powerful arms locked about his body, when yells sounded from the direction of the bunkhouse, accompanied by the scurrying of feet and shouts demanding to know what all the trouble was about.

Boots saw that the situation was hopeless. In a matter of seconds, the entire gang would pile down on them. He redoubled his effort to break the grip of the man who had seized him. At the same time he yelled to Turner.

"Beat it! Clear out—get up th' mountain! Get away or—"

An avalanche of dark forms fell on him, cut off his shouts to Turner, bore him to the ground and pinned him down. At the same time men fell on Turner too. Boots could hear him struggling with terrific fierceness. Oaths and the thud of fists meeting flesh accompanied the sounds of the encounter. But in the end they seemed to get control of the fiercely fighting madman and make him a prisoner.

Boots heard a voice of authority demanding:

"Who are they? What are they doin' here? What's it all about?"

"Dunno, Rex. Me an' Butch was comin' up from th' pump house where we was workin' when we heard voices behind th' powder house. We figgered it was th' buck that's been stealin' our dynamite. So we sneaked round to have a look-see. We found two of 'em an' jumped 'em. I reckon it's th' pair we're after—th' bums that's made us short of dynamite."

"I hope it is. I'll twist their damned necks for 'em. They been crampin' our work long enough. Yank 'em up to th' bunkhouse. We'll fix 'em," said Rex Castor. Then turning to O'Gara, he added, "I reckon yuh come just in time tuh see some fun, Gil."

"Fun, huh? I ain't here for no fun, savvy? Git rid o' these buzzards quick as possible, Rex, 'cause I'm wantin' you an' yuhr gang to bust over to th' Kettle outfit. Got word from Yerbe an' Bender Erps hidin' in Segundo that that trail herd's formed an' 'bout ready to move. They're gonna bring it down th' Kettle trail with a helluvah big force of rannies an' that Silent Shannon's gonna be with 'em. We're gonna have a helluvah fight on our hands to stop that outfit from gettin' through to th' Kettle outfit, lemme tell yuh. But by tripe, yuh gotta stop 'em and clean up their herd if it's th' last thing you an' yuhr gang ever do. Savvy?"

"Don't worry, Gil. We'll clean 'em

up. Th' boys are purty damned sore 'bout th' trimmin' that Shannon sucker gave 'em in Segundo yesterday. We lost thirteen men. They're out to get him, an' when they know he's takin' that trail herd through, they'll be raring to go. He's gotta be got outa th' sheriff's job before this here country is gonna be safe for us, savvy, an' we'll take any chances to clean him up. How 'bout it, fellahs?"

Growled approvals answered Castor's statement. He added:

"Yank these suckers up to camp so's we can see who they are. Get a move on, too."

Rough hands pinioned Boots Eddy's arms behind him and seizing him by the shoulders hustled him forward, toward the bunkhouse.

The gang had a harder time with Turner. The moment he got on his feet again he began fighting, and so terrifically strong was he that he almost broke loose. Oaths and the sound of a violent scuffle came to Boots out of the darkness. The boy knew that the madman was giving the gang a handful of trouble. But suddenly the scuffling stopped. Some one ripped out a dirty oath. Another one laughed unpleasantly. Still a third spoke:

"Gawd, what a crack. I think yuh busted his skull, Wes."

"Busted nawthin'. An' if I did, what of it? Nawthin' like a cold gun butt tuh settle that kind of a hombre. Tote him in, boys," growled an ugly voice.

Boots went sick to his stomach. Someone had hit Turner in the head with a clubbed six-gun. Instantly thoughts of Mabel Turner came to him. Had the gang killed her father? Boots worried more over the fate of the madman than he did over what was going to happen to him.

CHAPTER XII

O'Gara's Iron Hand

THE main cabin of the camp was a big structure made mostly of adobe with a roof of alamo poles plastered over with sunbaked mud. It was poorly lighted by a single swinging oil lamp that hung almost in the center of the room over a long table. It was a stinking, smelly sort of a place, reeking with the mingled fumes of kerosene, stale tobacco, the strong odor of grease and the smell of sweaty and unclean human bodies. Boots felt a trifle nauseated when he was shoved almost headlong through the door and told to stand with his back against the rear wall. A lot of the gang crowded in after him to look him over. Before they all entered, however, four men, half carrying and half dragging the limp form of Turner, entered and dropped him heavily to the floor. Boots stared down at him and his heart grew heavy. Turner's face was a sight. The pistol butt had opened a great wound in his forehead diagonally across the scar that had disfigured his features. His face and hair and beard were matted with blood. He was a hideous spectacle. Men crowded around to look at him.

"Sufferin' tripe, who is he? Looks like a wild man. Damn, he's th' sucker's been livin' up in th' caves. He's th' bird that strangled Bill Eggers an' Lonu Kling an' drug their bodies down here—put a skull on their chests. Remember? Boys, we've caught th' wild man an'—"

The men fell back and became silent. Gil O'Gara elbowed his way through the crowd. He was a big man, almost as big as Turner, with a little more corpulence. His face was heavy featured and surly looking. His mean, beady eyes were set at a slight slant, and his forehead was low. He had the jowls of a pig, and thick, heavy lips. He used one arm with a peculiar awkwardness, due to a heavy metal hand that dangled at the end of it.

He bent down and stared at the bloody face of the madman, and an ugly oath escaped him.

"Wild man, hell. That's Turner. I'll be damned! I didn't know he was alive. That's where I hit him. See

th' ol' scar? It's him all right. We left him in his cabin down by th' river when we set it on fire. Remember Rex? I thought he burned to death. But th' sucker musta crawled out an' got away. He's been livin' up in th' Injun caves. He's th' spook that's been scarin' you fellahs green. I reckon he's plumb coo-coo from that bash in th' head I gave him. But doggone, if I'd of known he was alive, I wouldn't of rested none. That bird staked out these oil claims. They're his by rights an' if he ever could prove we jumped 'em, we'd shore be in bad. Is he dead I wonder?"

O'Gara used his good hand to feel for the pulse in Turner's neck.

"Naw, he ain't dead—nowheres near it," he said, with an oath.

"Well he will be," snarled a voice behind O'Gara, as Cigarette Evans stepped forward, his six-gun in his hand.

O'Gara stood up and shoved him aside.

"Wait a minute, Evans. Don't be so damned hasty. He's comin' to now. Lemme see if he is nuts. If he ain't, we can use th' sucker before we beef him. He knows more about oil than any of you birds. Mebby we can make him tell us why none of th' wells we've drilled ain't come in yet, savvy?"

"Awer, he can't tell yuh no more 'bout oil wells than I can," rasped the man called Butch. "I'm tellin' yuh, we ain't drilled any deep enough an' we ain't put a big enough charge into them that we've shot. I've got a well loaded now that'll come in, lemme tell yuh. I'm loadin' her to the muzzle. I've got five gallons of soup in her an' I'm gonna put in five more soon's I get that dynamite boiled down. I'll show yuh a well that'll be a gusher an'—"

A strange convulsion shook Turner's heavy form, and a heavy sob escaped him, interrupting the well shooter's dissertation on the gusher. Turner's eyes opened, and he sat up, to stare blankly about for a moment. Then suddenly he looked up at Gil O'Gara.

It almost seemed to Boots as if a mask dropped from Turner's face, it changed so suddenly. Boots could see that he was no longer mad. Full sanity had returned to him suddenly. The last blow on the head must have relieved the pressure on his brain from the old wound, for he unquestionably was rational once more. For a moment he stared up at Gil O'Gara. Then with an oath he hurled himself to his feet.

"Gil O'Gara! It's you, is it? Tryin' to jump my oil claims are yuh? You dirty, low-flung, double-dyed devil, I'll—"

With an oath Turner hurled himself at Gil O'Gara. The iron-handed one tried to take a quick step backward and at the same time swing his mighty, clublike fist to crash that terrible weapon of his down on the skull of the oil locator. But O'Gara's backward step was impeded by an empty box, beside the table, that had been used as a chair. His foot became entangled in it. He staggered, and tried to keep himself from falling. But even as he struggled to maintain his balance, the heavy form of Turner struck him solidly and the oil locators powerful arms locked about O'Gara's body. They lurched heavily against the table, upsetting it with a crash as they both fell to the floor and rolled over and over, locked together in terrible combat.

It was a terrific fight while it lasted. Both men were big and powerful and tremendously strong. Turner, because of the life he had led, was as tough and as hard as a range bull. O'Gara was softer and inclined toward flabbiness, but he had a brutal temper and a formidable weapon in that mailed fist of his, with which he tried to club Turner to insensibility.

Again and again he tried to bring that hellish fist down on the top of Turner's skull. But the oil man managed somehow each time to get his head out of the way, while he pummeled O'Gara relentlessly with his own great fists. Chairs and benches that clut-

tered the room went to pieces as they rolled across the floor. The table was jammed into one corner. By the fierceness of their struggle, they cleared a place for themselves in the room. Men instinctively got out of their way.

Both were rasping curses and breathing heavily. Both were kicking, gouging and flailing with mighty fists. The ugly smack of flesh meeting flesh as knuckles were driven home sounded above the struggle, and now and then echoed a duller thudding sound as O'Gara's iron fist landed like a club somewhere on the back or shoulders of Turner, or missing him crashed against the floor boards or rapped against the overturned table. Boots Eddy stood with his back against the wall of the cabin, staring in wide eyed amazement at the fury of the combat. The other onlookers were equally spellbound.

Faster and fiercer the two men battled. It was a life or death struggle; that was evident. Turner meant to beat O'Gara to pulp. O'Gara was fighting for his life. Two wolves with fangs fastened in each other's throats never fought harder.

They surged to their knees, then to their feet, still locked together and still twisting and turning and struggling madly. O'Gara was trying harder to get a fair shot at Turner's skull with his iron hand. Well he knew that one solid blow with his iron fist would bring Turner to his knees.

Turner seemed to realize that too, and he guarded himself carefully against such a blow. Always he fought to keep that iron hand of O'Gara's useless and impotent. Twice he locked O'Gara's wrist in a grip of steel and held fast while he pummeled him with his one free hand. Once Turner managed to grip O'Gara's iron hand under his left arm, between his body and his bulging bicep, thus holding O'Gara a prisoner while he hammered at his face and head with his right fist.

O'Gara wrenched and struggled and fought harder than ever to free himself, but Turner held fast and crashed right upon right solidly into the man's unprotected face. O'Gara took a lot of punishment for a few moments as Turner drove his right to his face with terrible smashes. Again and again O'Gara's head snapped backward and sideways as that heavy fist crashed home, while O'Gara tried to tear himself away from Turner.

For the first time O'Gara began to cry out for help.

"Kill him! Kill th' buzzard! Shoot him! He's murderin' me—Damn!"

Several things happened in such startlingly swift succession that Boots Eddy was hardly able to grasp the sequence of events. Turner with a mighty smash literally knocked O'Gara loose from his metal hand and sent him staggering across the room. Boots in amazement saw that the imprisoned iron hand was still locked under Turner's arm after the oil locator drove that terrific blow into O'Gara's face. But he did not have time to marvel at the occurrence. With O'Gara's yell for assistance, men who had been spellbound by the viciousness of the encounter suddenly remembered that it was their leader who was calling for help.

The first to leap forward was the killer, Cigarette Evans. With a curse he whipped out his six-gun and leveled it at the back of Turner's head. Boots realized that at point blank range Evans could never miss. In an instant a slug of flaming lead would tear its way through Turner's brain. Instinctively Boots tried to come to Turner's rescue. There was a broken chair within his reach. Regardless of consequences he leaped forward and grabbed this as the only available weapon, intending to hurl it at the killer. Even as his hand closed on the shattered back of the chair, a terrific roar filled the close confines of the cabin.

Boots went sick to his stomach. He was certain Cigarette Evans had killed Turner. But to his utter amazement he discovered as he looked up that the

shot had not come from the killer's gun. It was Cigarette Evans and not Turner who was staggering across the floor. He was groping at a great open wound in his chest from which blood flowed in an ugly stream. His six-gun fell from his death relaxed fingers, and a split second later, with a gurgling sob of breath departing from perforated lungs, the killer pitched face forward on the floor of the cabin. Every man in the room stared toward the door in stupid amazement.

Boots shot a glance in that direction. For an instant he could not believe his eyes. There in the portal, framed against the blackness of the night outside, with a six-gun smoking in his right hand and another in his left slowly sweeping the room, stood Silent Shannon, his agate gray eyes blazing with a cold fire.

"Put 'em up—all of yuh. Reach high!" he snapped. Then shooting a glance at Boots Eddy he commanded:

"Outside, Boots! Git out quick. You too, Turner!"

Neither Boots nor Turner needed a second invitation. Both moved swiftly toward the door and slid out behind Shannon, Boots pausing long enough to sweep up from the floor the six-gun that had dropped from the hand of Cigarette Evans.

Behind Shannon's guns, Boots paused a moment on the threshold. Shannon was talking in cold tones.

"You, Hammer-head, step out, with yuhr hands high. Greasy Cunado too. Likewise Castor. You three are goin' back to Segundo with me an'—"

Plow-w-w! Plow-w-w! Plow-w-w! Crash!

CHAPTER XIII

Lead Drenched Lava

OVER Shannon's shoulder, Boots Eddy saw what happened.

Among the crowd of men were two rash spirits. As Hammerhead Healy and Greasy Cunado reluctantly stepped forward at the command of the sheriff, two men in the gang dug for their guns simultaneously, both convinced that Shannon's full attention was on the men he intended to take back as prisoners.

Both gunmen paid for their rashness. Shannon caught the gleam of lamplight on their weapons as they glided from their holsters, and with the swiftness of a striking rattler he fired left and right in quick succession.

The man on his right was drilled clean and pitched to the floor face forward, dead before he could pull trigger. But the man on his left moved a split second faster. Even as Shannon's twin guns roared, his weapon spewed flame and lead. But Shannon's bullet had already hit him, with the result that the man was knocked staggering backward and his gun hand jerked upward toward the roof of the cabin. As his gun roared the lead crashed through the single swinging lamp hanging from the rafters in the center of the room, blowing it to a hundred shattered pieces and knocking it to the floor. The cabin was in utter darkness.

For a moment tense silence gripped the scene and its actors. Shannon was still covering the darkened room with his guns from the doorway. But he knew full well that, under cover of that darkness, every man in the place was digging for his six-gun and that he made a pretty target standing in the doorway. Indeed, even as that realization flashed through his mind, he heard both Gil O'Gara and Rex Castor rip out commands.

"Grab yuhr guns, boys, an' get that buzzard! Lead him—he's in th' doorway! Sling it into him!" And a split second later a half dozen streaks of flame split the dark interior of the cabin while shrieking lead raked the open doorway.

But Silent Shannon's form no longer filled the portal. An instant after the light crashed out, he leaped sideways. Shoving Boots Eddy out of the line of fire from the doorway, he said:

"Get goin', quick, Boots. They'll be

pilin' out in a hurry. I'll hold 'em off. You an' Turner take to cover."

Crouching like a panther, Shannon backed off with both guns trained on the open cabin door.

Instinct prompted both Turner and Boots Eddy to turn toward the precipitous slope of the lava mountain, with its caves and pot-holes for protection. It was the way they had come into the valley and the natural way for them to retreat now that retreat was necessary. Those caves and pot-holes would give them the quickest and most secure shelter. Both started toward the base of the mountain at a swift run. Shannon followed them, backing away from the cabin but still keeping his guns leveled on the open door.

For the period of a dozen seconds nothing happened. The men inside the darkened cabin were as fully aware of the fact that Shannon had his guns trained on the doorway as if they could see him. They all knew that the first man through that portal would stop lead, and a lot of it, and they were all reluctant to take the chance. Meanwhile Rex Castor and Gil O'Gara were cursing them for gutless cowards.

"They'll git away! Git after 'em, yuh pups! Bust out there. Here, gimme room—I'll go out!" yelled the voice of Castor with many curses.

A wild scramble followed inside the cabin and presently Castor himself leaped through the doorway to be followed by several other men.

But by that time Shannon had backed out of good six-gun range. His Colts roared and roared again. Castor did not go down, but the second man through the doorway did; so did the third. The fourth and fifth men got clear, and presently the gang was boiling out of the cabin. Stabbing flashes began to split the darkness as the bunch opened up at the slowly retreating sheriff.

Shannon answered the fire, hurling shot after shot into the gang as he backed slowly toward the slope of the lava mountain where Boots and Turner had gone. Boots and the oil locator had gained the lower slope and the first of the pot-holes. Boots was shouting to Shannon:

"Here — thisaway, Terry. There's caves up th' mountain. It's th' best place to make a stand—they can't get us up there. An' we got dynamite. C'mon!"

Shannon retreated slowly, still firing. Black forms were still emanating from the dark doorway of the cabin, who began firing as soon as they got outside. The darkness was ripped wide open by the spiteful flashes of a score of six-guns, while the roar of the Colts crashed against the sides of the lava mountains and was hurled back across the narrow valley in a thunderous reecho. Lead was flying in fierce gusts toward the slowly retreating sheriff. The bullets smacked and spattered against the lava cliffs behind him. Some of the leaden messengers of death were breathing their hot and hissing breath uncomfortably close to him.

But he never flinched. Methodically he kept his own guns roaring, firing right and left as accurately as the darkness and the shooting distance would permit. He heard curses and yells of pain, and he knew that he was accounting for some of the gang. But his twin guns were by no means sufficiently effective to check the ever increasing bunch of killers who were bearing down on him. They came on in spite of his two blazing guns. And they came fast. Moreover his roaring weapons were reaching the point of emptiness.

He had tried to keep count of his shots, but he found that difficult. He knew that both guns were emptying fast but he did not realize how fast until suddenly the hammer of his right Colt fell with a hollow cluck on a spent cartridge. A moment later his left hand gun clicked to silence. Both were empty, and the gang was coming on hell bent to get him.

There was nothing for Silent Shannon to do but to retreat on a run. He

had backed to within fifty feet of the base of the lava mountain, up the side of which Boots Eddy and Turner had climbed. Turning, he sprinted for the precipitous slope, sheathing his six-guns as he ran. A moment later the whole gang was in full cry on his trail, like a pack of flesh hungry wolves.

"His guns are dead. We'll fix that lousy sheriff this time! We got him on th' run. Stop him before he gets into them pot-holes!" were the yells raised by the gang.

Silent Shannon moved fast. At a stiff sprint he crossed the remaining fifty feet of sand and gravel to the beginning of the slope. Then dodging in and out among some boulders of the black rock, he reached the beginning of the climb and started to scramble up. For a moment it was a question in his mind whether he could reach the protection of the first of the series of caves and pot-holes above him. That gang was coming fast. They were firing furiously too. As he began to scale the stiff slope, lead whined and smacked uncomfortably close to him, so close in fact that hot flakes of it burned his face and threw flinty particles of lava into his eyes as slugs spattered against the hard rock.

It was touch and go whether Shannon could climb high enough to duck into one of the caves or pockets in the lava before the gang reached the foot of the slope and started up after him. Terry climbed fiercely and as he climbed he thanked Providence for the fact that nature had made that slope full of fissures and crannies into which he could hook hands and toes and shinny upward. Higher and higher he struggled while the gang closed in.

A glance over his shoulder and downward showed him the foremost of the bunch coming in close. In a dozen seconds they would be at the foot of the slope and gunning up at him. He would be an easy and helpless mark. He almost visioned the picture he would make when a bullet ploughed through him. He had seen panthers shot out of trees. He would come down just that way, arms and legs reaching and clawing as he fell.

He looked upward. If he could only reach one of those ledges where he could fling himself flat and reload his six-guns! If he could only reach one of those openings into which he could make a stand! He could stop that gang then. He could—

A shout came down to him from above. It was followed by a shot. Then another and another. Shannon saw flashing jets of fire leaping from the edge of a ledge high above him. Boots Eddy was bringing into action the six-gun that had been Cigarette Evans'.

He was shooting close too. Shannon heard a yelled oath and a groan from the approaching mob; then another curse as one of Eddy's slugs found a mark. At the same time Boots' voice echoed down to him.

"Climb, Terry. Keep comin'. Up here!"

Shannon climbed faster. He reached a ledge and crawled up on top of it. Momentarily he was out of gunshot from below. The gang could not reach him with their slugs although they tried hard enough. Bullets clipped the edge of the ledge and, ricochetting, went screaming off into the night. Shannon smiled grimly as, lying flat, he yanked his six-guns and began to eject the spent cartridges in both cylinders. As the brass shells tinkled down the slope, he risked a glance over the ledge.

The gang had come in uncomfortably close. They were ducking and dodging among the boulders at the foot of the slope, firing up at him. Some had even started to climb the lower slope. Boots Eddy's gun was still roaring from a ledge up above. He was making it hot for some of those dodging figures.

Swiftly Silent Shannon emptied the cylinders and reloaded them, and by the time Boots Eddy's gun went dead Shannon had his ready for action. Nor

was he long in bringing them into play again. Looking over the edge of the ledge, he spotted a dark form slipping behind a boulder, close to the foot of the slope.

With careful aim he cut loose two quick shots in succession, and he had the satisfaction of hearing a yell of pain echo up to him as the form leaped into plain sight and darted back to safe cover. But before he reached it, Shannon snapped another shot at him and heard a second yell as the man flung up his hands and pitched face forward to lie there, a black blot on the white sand.

Shannon laughed coldly.

"How's that, Castor? Ain't I hell when it comes to runnin' shots? Me, I can hit a jackrabbit on th' lope. Some o' you fellahs gimme another chance like that if yuh wanta see me do some wing shootin' with a six-gun!" he yelled down derisively.

Only curses and a fiercer burst of firing answered his taunting remarks. For a moment the gusts of lead hurled up at the shelf on which he was stretched were so vicious that Shannon had to keep his head down. But as it decreased, he risked looking over the ledge again and marking some of the stabbing flashes in the darkness below him for future targets.

He watched one gun rapping with pulsating regularity from behind a ridge of rock well up toward the foot of the slope. The man was firing with methodical accuracy, his bullets just clipping the edge of the ledge. Some of them spattered flakes of lava into Shannon's face, the flinty particles cutting his flesh.

"Hell's whiskers, that sucker's gunnin' too damned accurate," he muttered as he worked his way along the ledge on his stomach until he found a slight declivity into which he could rest the barrel of one of his Colts. Leveling it there he watched and waited for the next flash of the six-gun. As it flamed, he fired; then fired again, hurling two shots in quick succession.

Again his shots were answered by a yell of pain and a curse. He saw his man come up behind the ridge of rock. He groped in the darkness for a moment; then, with a groan, fell face forward over the ridge that had sheltered him, his form merging with the blackness of the rock.

At the same time oaths of consternation came up to him through the darkness to be followed by a shout.

"Hell's hinges, Rex, he got Hammerhead. Drilled him plumb through th' face. Damn him for a close shootin' louse."

Shannon laughed tauntingly again.

"Glad to know I got *that* sucker, Castor. That's two of th' bucks I'm after. I'm gonna get Greasy Cunado an' you, too, before I get through; likewise Gil O'Gara an' a few others. Where is that heller with th' iron paw?" called Shannon, sneeringly.

Once again a string of profanity came up to him and a fierce blast of hot lead drenched the lava ledge. Castor cursed the sheriff out with sulphurous oaths.

"Yuh've done all th' gettin' yuh're gonna do, Shannon. Th' sheriff's office in this county is gonna be vacant before daybreak, savvy? Greasy, take a couple men an' go back to th' cabin. Git all th' rifles you can gather up an' plenty ammunition. We'll give this two-for-a-nickel sheriff some high-powered hell an' see how he likes it. We'll cut that ledge to pieces under him if we hafta. We're gonna see that buzzard fall outa his nest yet."

"Rifles! Damn, that's th' ticket. We can git th' sucker with them!" yelled Cunado. "Pepper hell outa that ledge an' make him keep his head down while I go back to th' cabin. C'mon Butch, you an' Lafe an' Gus Gammage. We'll fix that bird."

Rifles! Shannon echoed under his breath the jubilant yelp of Greasy Cunado, only he wasn't at all jubilant about it. It would be close range work. Those bucks weren't more than a hundred feet below him. If they brought

their high-powered guns into action they could smack and spatter enough steel-jacketed bullets up there against his ledge to make it uncomfortable.

He would have to get out of there. His cover was nowhere near ample to withstand heavy, concentrated rifle fire. He'd have to climb higher. He would have to get up to where Boots Eddy and Turner were, perhaps higher. And he would have to climb fast and in the face of a hot fire from below. But if he waited until that gang brought their rifles into action his chances of ever reaching ledges or caves higher up would be hopeless.

Despite the ripping roar of six-guns from below and the hail of hot lead that shrieked and screamed up at him and spattered against the lava all around him, Silent Shannon looked over the ledge.

He could see Cunado and his men ducking out from behind the boulders that sheltered them and running toward the cabin. But he did not take any pot shots at them. He was more interested in surveying the situation below him.

There were plenty guns blazing away at him down there. They split the darkness in a score of places. But it was fairly long range work for six-guns; long for accurate shooting at any rate. He decided swiftly that while they were yet hammering at him with sixes, before they had any harder shooting weapons to train against him, he had better make an effort to reach some one of the ledges or caves higher up.

He surveyed the face of the lava mountain above him. There were plenty of shelters for him to duck into, but it was a stiff climb upward. His progress would be slow and meanwhile he would be a perfect target against the face of the mountain. Still he would have to make the attempt, for he knew full well that when they got to blazing at him from below with thirty-thirties and .303's, or even the old-fashioned forty-five seventy Winchesters, it would not be long before they would get him.

While he meditated Shannon's fingers were busy ejecting the few spent shells in his six-guns and reloading the empty chambers. The task finished he slipped them into their holsters; then, he began to wriggle along the narrow ledge to the end where it looked to him in the darkness as if he could, by a brief climb, reach a pocket about fifteen feet higher up the face of the mountain. Here he might pause and rest for a higher climb.

Reaching the end of the ledge he slowly got to his knees, then to his feet. The gang down there were still peppering the ledge. They had not discovered that he had wriggled out of his original position.

A moment he stood flattened against the lava face of the mountain as he looked down. Then slowly and cautiously he began to climb, hoping that his form would be lost against the blackness of the lava cliff. But he had scarcely taken his first step upward when a pebble dislodged by his foot rattled down the mountain. Instantly the gang below discovered him.

"There he is—climbin'. He's tryin' for that pocket. We got th' buzzard now. Shoot him down—sling lead into him an' watch him fall. Yip-eeee! It's good-by sheriff this time. We'll fill him full of lead."

Men leaped to their feet down there and their six-guns burst into a thunderous roar as a score of flame-belching muzzles were turned upward while a score of trigger-fingers worked with fierce frenzy, hurling a hurricane of lead at him. They were trying their hardest to bring him down. And Silent Shannon, clinging to insecure footing, realized that it would be a miracle if he managed to gain the shelter of the nearest cave above before that blast from below brought him down.

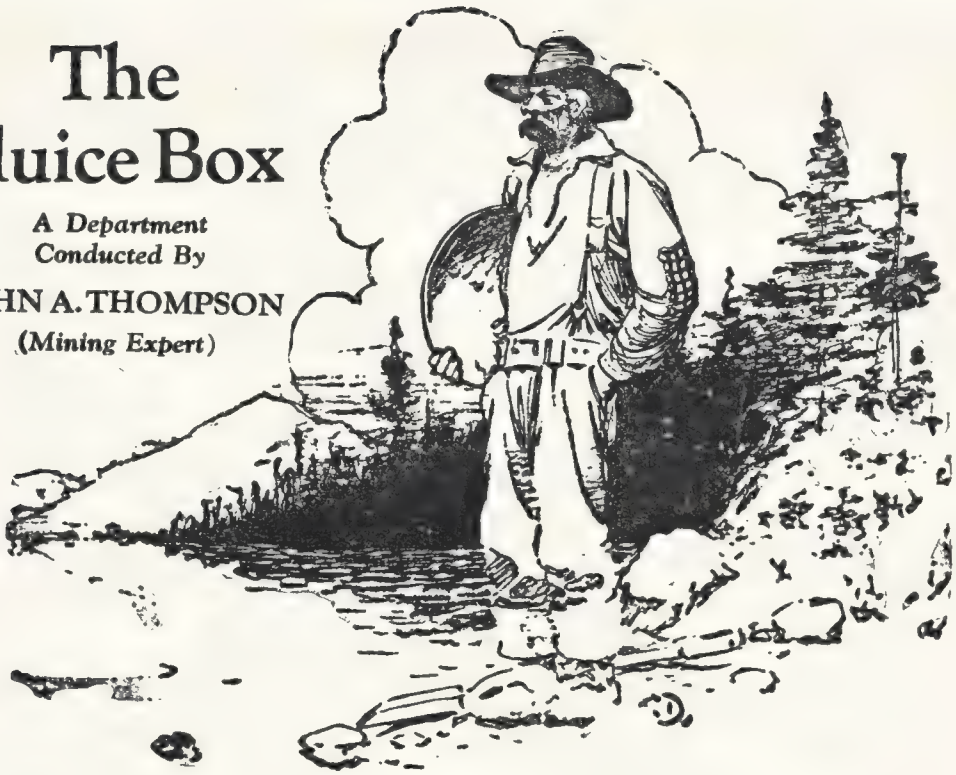
(To be continued in the next issue)

The Sluice Box

A Department Conducted By

JOHN A. THOMPSON

(Mining Expert)



THIS department is intended to be of real interest and practical assistance to all readers of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE. It is conducted by the well-known John A. Thompson, mining expert. In each issue will be published some interesting facts concerning the various phases of prospecting and mining, based on John A. Thompson's many years of actual experience in the West and in Alaska. Prospecting problems and procedure will be discussed regularly. Also, questions relating to mining laws, field conditions, new and old mining territories, and so forth, will be answered in this department. If you wish a personal answer, enclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your question. Address all questions to John A. Thompson, Mining Expert, care of ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.

No. 55. Another Gold Boom in Alaska

THERE has been another gold boom in Alaska. Two of them, in fact in widely separated sections of the territory. One of the booms occurred in the little explored and mountainous country in southeastern Alaska back of Hyder up by the Canadian boundary. The other gold strike, the one with which this article is concerned, was reported from the neighborhood of Poorman in the Ruby district.

Ruby is far to the north, way beyond the big bend in the Yukon where that mighty river ceases flowing northward and turns to run westward to the sea, its muddy waters pouring into the ocean at St. Michaels. Formerly to reach Ruby one had to river boat it down the Yukon from White Horse, or up from St. Michaels in the summer when the ice was out of the stream. Now with the Government railroad touching at Nenana, the trip is not quite so long and tedious. A boat plying on the Yukon and stopping at Ruby runs down from Nenana at very infrequent intervals.

Going downstream, Ruby is on the left bank of the Yukon. The town consists of—or at least used to consist of—a landing wharf, a muddy street, four of five large frame buildings housing a hotel, a bank, a post office and a few stores. Spread around this business center are—or were a few

years ago—a large number of cabins, some of them in good repair and occupied, others abandoned and slowly crumbling through lack of attention. That's Ruby, the supply center for the Ruby mining district.

In summer this outpost quite frequently swelters under a thermometer that registers ninety and over in the shade. The greatest indoor sport is swatting a particularly vicious and long-billed brand of mosquito that flourishes on a diet of raw prospector until the first frost sets in along about the end of August. During cold snaps in the winter the temperature around Ruby may and does sometimes drop to sixty below zero. But there aren't any mosquitoes so one doesn't mind it so much.

The country is dreary, desolate—a rolling terrain of low ridges, and squat flat-topped spurs. Off to the south some higher mountains stand out in bold relief. Except back in the mountains the streams are not glittering, cascading torrents sparkling in the summer sunlight. They are sluggish, slow-moving and decidedly muddy, and they meander in wide bends back and forth across the valleys. Mud is such a predominant characteristic that one of the most prominent of the section's rivers is known with truthful bluntness as the Big Mud.

On the ridges and mounds as well as in some of the mountain sections there is a growth of birch, aspen, tamarack, spruce and cottonwood to relieve the monotony of a barren landscape.

Willows suitable for the cook stove and other fuel purposes grow close to some of the creek beds.

The working season in summer is short—barely four months in a good year. Generally rain is plentiful. The rest of the time the country is snowbound, the rivers covered with a solid floor of ice. Most of the hauling of mine machinery and supplies is done in the winter. Dogs are used largely and there is a good trail back and over the divide to Poorman. In summer the journey can be made by wagon road to Long, and thence on to Poorman over a muddy, deep-rutted, almost indistinguishable trail, or by small power boats going up the Sulatna River. It is no gay, week-end pleasure trip by either route.

Game is by no means plentiful, especially in the vicinity of the older established mining settlements. Off in the mountains—and there is still plenty of unexplored country back there—an occasional caribou may be sighted, but the region affords nothing like the great herds of the creatures that used to roam the Yukon plains in other places. Bears are present but certainly not numerous. Now and then a porcupine may be met with. Moose are scarcer than caribou. Rabbits, ptarmigan—the dull-witted arctic wild hens that can be whacked on the head with a club when caught in tangling low brush—and grouse vary in abundance from year to year with the supply apparently diminishing steadily. The region is manifestly not important as far as trapping for furs is concerned.

Salmon, whitefish and pike—all good eating—may be caught in the Yukon. Grayling skim through the smaller streams and trout can be caught up in the mountain creeks where the water is clear.

The boom at Poorman was not set in a locale new to gold mining. The Ruby district has been a placer producer for some time. Its fortunes fluctuate. One season the camps are humming. The next there may be a let-down.

Gold was first discovered on the short ten-mile Ruby Creek that empties into the Yukon where the town of Ruby now stands. Only a few thousand dollars' worth of yellow metal was taken out that year—1907—and nobody gave the place much thought. Intermittent prospecting was carried on back of Ruby. In 1910 Long Creek was opened up with a bang, and Ruby flourished. Poorman Creek was not discovered till later when the Long Creek rush had died down and the

prospectors who were in the section, disappointed at finding only slim pickings at Long, ventured still farther afield.

Poorman turned out to be one of the most consistent producers in the neighborhood. A little camp was formed there.

In general the placers throughout the district are of a more or less uniform depth, covered with considerable overburden and quite irregular. The pay streaks are not continuous and they lie on the bottoms of the broad silt-filled valleys. Bench claims are numerous but in the majority of cases before the values have been reached prospectors are down pretty close to the bedrock level of the adjacent valley. In other words the gold was not deposited in the benches anyhow but lies, as it does in other parts of the district, in a coarse gravel just above bedrock.

Colors and possibly a few cents to the pan can be found almost anywhere in the valley beds where the country rock is a decomposed schist, or slatey.

However quite frequently the gold is not concentrated enough to be worked profitably by dredges or hydraulicking on a large scale, let alone rich enough for hand working by small outfits or individual prospectors.

On Ruby Creek the pay streak was less than two miles long and its yield was little more than something to write home hopefully about. The importance of the stream is historical rather than economic. It was the first gold producer in the district.

On Long Creek on the left side of the stream and between one hundred and six hundred feet away from it much more money was taken out. The distances to bedrock vary from about twenty-five to fifty feet. In some places gold was discovered on or directly above bedrock. In others the pay dirt lay on a hard clayey formation, or false bedrock four or five feet above the true bedrock.

The gold is almost always associated with a rough gravel imbedded in a tough, sticky clay. Nuggets were fairly frequent, small chunks of gold running up to twenty-five dollars each in value being a not uncommon find. It is difficult to sluice this stuff because of the tendency of the clay to gum up in balls and roll out of the sluice boxes and over the riffles without giving up the gold. As a rule it is necessary to break the material up thoroughly before running it through the sluices. The gravel is therefore first washed in a dump box.

In general the gold bearing gravel is deep enough to be in the permanently frozen area and underground mining methods are used to get the material to the surface for washing. Very little timber is necessary because of the frozen nature of the ground.

Gravel that assays from $1.50 to $3.00 and up can be made to pay by a man experienced in this type of mining and who knows thoroughly what he is about.

The novice however ought to have something considerably richer to begin on, or else an experienced partner.

On account of the difficulty in getting all the gold values out of the tenacious clay matrix some of the miners make a habit of saving the dump and washing it over again for the stuff they missed the first time.

Over on Bear Pup the gravels are much shallower and after about fifteen feet of silt and worthless covering material has been removed the ground can be worked by open cut mining methods as is customary with gold placers. Some big nuggets have been found around there in the past. One, bringing in nineteen hundred dollars in a single glittering chunk of yellow metal, was uncovered on the Mascot bench at the mouth of the Pup. A two-hundred-dollar nugget has also been reported and several with values of fifty dollars or over.

Poorman Creek, where the reports of new finds in the district have come from, was first staked in 1913. It's rich in spots but getting the gold is

no simple matter of arriving with a shovel, a set of sluice boxes, plenty of elbow grease and lots of hope. Expert placer mining is involved. The ground is deep, bedrock in some places being eighty feet under the surface. A few feet below the surface the ground is permanently frozen of course, and a shaft must be sunk to the gold-bearing gravel and then cross drifts driven through it so the pay dirt can be brought to the shaft and hoisted up to the surface and put on a dump for future washing. If you happen to have a rich claim this provides a very pleasant and athletic all winter occupation. The gold can be sluiced out in the spring.

Coarse gold and twenty-five-dollar nuggets are fairly frequent but the gold bearing gravel only extends about two or three feet above bedrock.

So far the chief feature of the Ruby district has been its placers. The future of the section may quite possibly lie in lode gold mines that are as yet undiscovered and which provided the source of the gold in the old stream gravels. Little lode prospecting has been done in the mountains back of Ruby. Much of the section has only been partially explored. Even so stringers and leads that look promising have been reported in the hills. Eventualy big gold mines may be developed there. In the past most of the prospectors have been placer men—men looking for gold in stream bottoms, gold that is comparatively easy to obtain. The possibilities of lode mines have hardly been touched on.

1—(a) Is it true that gold has been found in every Province in Canada? (b) How about Quebec? James Brawley, Columbus, Ohio.

Ans. (a) Almost. Gold has been found in every Province in Canada except Prince Edward Island. (b) The Province of Quebec, where the famous Noranda mines are, is one of the most important copper-gold producing regions in the whole British Empire.

2—(a) Could you tell me what "eye" agates are? Mrs. P. K. Johnson, Bristol, Tennessee.

Ans. (a) Eye agates have a semi-precious gem stone value and are merely agates with the color bands in concentric rings and a dark spot of bull's-eye in the center.

Do You Know Your SLUICE BOX?

1—In what general section of Alaska is the Ruby mining district?

2—On what big river is the town of Ruby?

3—What type of gold mining has been carried on there chiefly—lode or placer mining?

4—Are the gold-bearing gravels that lie close to bedrock near the surface of the ground or not in most instances?

5—Indications of what other important metals besides gold have been found in the neighborhood of Ruby?

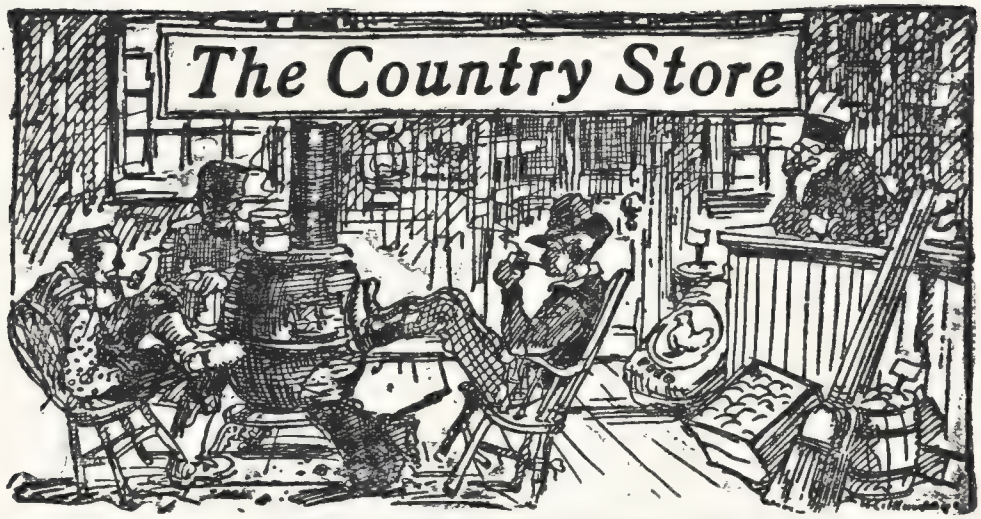
(The answers to these questions will be printed in the next issue of ACE-HIGH.)

Answers to Questions in First August Issue.

1—Dahlonega in Lumpkin County was one of Georgia's most important gold mining centers. 2—John C. Calhoun was part owner of a rich gold mine in Georgia. 3—The abandonment of Georgia's gold fields was caused by the depletion of her easily worked placers and the glowing reports that came into the camps of the discovery of gold in California. 4—Many of the southern miners trekked West in the wake of the '49ers. 5—The Chestatee and Etowah rivers and their tributaries were rich in placer gold.

HYDER in southeastern Alaska is close to another recent gold boom and something of the country round that section will be told here in the next issue of ACE-HIGH.

John A. Thompson



A GET-TOGETHER DEPARTMENT FOR GENERAL SERVICE TO OUR READERS

Conducted by The Storekeeper

THE BARGAIN COUNTER

If you want to exchange something you have but don't want, for something you want that someone else has, here is the place to do it. It must be understood that ACE-HIGH *cannot be held responsible for losses sustained by our readers.*

Announcements inserted free of charge, but they must not exceed 21 words inclusive of name and address, and must be either typed or hand-printed. Nothing but BONA FIDE trades acceptable; announcements of articles for sale will be ignored. State both what you have and what you want. Study examples of announcements in this issue for the proper way to draft yours.

The United States Government prohibits the mailing of firearms capable of being concealed on the person, therefore swaps of revolvers, pistols, etc., will not be published in "The Bargain Counter."

Want telephone directory of your town. Goods to trade. Write for list. R. Fairbanks, Box 951, Rochester, N. Y.

Have ¼ h. p. motor, trumpet and music, wrist watch, tools, stock, dies and cutter. Want motorcycle, or? P. Terino, 1383 Hollywood Ave., Far Rockaway, N. Y.

Have complete 5-tube radio set, complete drafting outfit, guitar, typewriter, etc. Want musical instruments. Urbanos, 12230 Emerald, Chicago, Ill.

Have 2 factory built 5-tube radios, no cabinets, 2 battery chargers, tennis racquet. Want split bamboo casting rods. E. H. Roland, 5007 N. Hermitage Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Have you old coins? Send list with dates, and state what you want. I have it. Guns? Jack Clark, Vesper, Wis.

Have 32-stringed ukelin, violin-guitar with sheet music, etc. Want most anything. Send list. Jos. Sauer, 1321 Portland, Chicago Heights, Ill.

Want alto saxophone in good condition, also mimeograph with supplies. Send your list, mine will follow. D. Bensman, Two Rivers, Wis.

Want good combination night dog, also beagle hound. Have guns, radios, or what? E. H. Casto, 1801 3rd St., Moundsville, W. Va.

Have ACE-HIGH, Geographic, Popular Mechanics. Want U. S. coins. Send your list. F. Kerrigan, 89 Boerum Place, Brooklyn, N. Y.

Have MacFadden's encyclopedia of physical culture, five volumes, to swap for barbell course, or what have you? Percy Coombs, Box 444, Springfield, Vt.

Have 50 articles. Exchange lists. Want motorcycle, oil still, .410-ga. shotgun, outboard motor, No. 1 traps, or what? Clifford Boylin, Fox Lake, Ill.

Uke melody arrangements to popular songs to trade for anything useful. Tom Hirz, 339 Totowa Ave., Paterson, N. J.

Will give one precancelled stamp for every small town postmark. Send ten or more used envelopes. Lester L. Browning, P. O. Box 202, Natchez, Miss.

Elk teeth, spinning wheels, ivory veneer, buffalo robe, foreign coins. Want weapons, relics. E. Ritter, 356 E. 9th St., Erie, Pa.

Tear this slip off and mail it with your announcement—it entitles you to one *free* insertion in this Department. Announcements are limited to 21 words—trades only—no others considered. Announcements must be either typed or hand-printed. Mail them to ACE-HIGH, 80 Lafayette St., New York, N. Y.

Name .....

Street .....

City .....

(Void after August 22, 1930.)

Fortune telling chart for stamps on envelopes before 1870. W. J. Moore, 44 River, Salamanca, N. Y.

Want 1793, 1799, 1904, 1856 cents, dollars before 1840. Trade fifty arrowheads or coins each. J. Dalton, Wellsville, O.

Will swap 5 cards on Edison's Light Jubilee held in Detroit, for 10 U. S. or foreign coins, or 8 different U. S. or foreign paper money, except Marks. W. Lubzik, 2031 W. Warren Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Have blue tick coonhound, 2 years old. Want .22 Remington, .22 sporter, tent, or? R. E. Thompson, Box 62, Ft. Pierre, So. Dak.

Cigar bands, cigarette cards, view cards, and match books to swap for old coins. N. S. Smith, 146 Hendricks Ave., New Brighton, S. I., N. Y.

Want copy of Bradbeer's works on paper money. Elmer Wright, R. 5, Urbana, Ill.

Want microscope, naturalist's books, golf equipment, or stamps. Have beekeeping equipment, pictures of baseball players, magazines, BB gun. Will swap lists. L. G. Gemmell, 300 Wakelee Ave., Ansonia, Conn.

My oil paintings or painted pillow tops to trade for Indian relics or old glassware. Mrs. Lydia Beckett, Box 44, Galveston, Ind.

Want portable typewriter. Have first day covers, stamps, etc. Morris Adler, 1980 Madison Ave., New York City, N. Y.

Have lot in Northern Florida. Will trade for milk cows pure bred, heavy poultry, or? Geo. McJunkins, R. 1, Saluda, N. C.

Have violin, imported golf clubs, silver candle sticks, 5 x 7 ft. American flag, also French one. Want frontier guns. Clare, 1938 Chislett St., Pittsburgh, Pa.

Swap Tower and cone speaker, magazines, earphones, for old U. S. and foreign coins, or? A. Eidschun, 165 Cornelia St., East Rutherford, N. J.

Want Furness' edition of Shakespeare, mimeograph, old stamps on envelopes, stamp albums, for? Earl Planty, St. Lawrence University, R. 4, Canton, N. Y.

Trade South Bend 17-j. white gold case for Crossman .22, Iver Johnson champion .12 for .22 or .410. H. E. Bolan, Iroquois, S. D.

Exchange perfect butterflies with collectors in U. S. and foreign countries. Correspondence with naturalists solicited. John Pietroski, Box 118, Milford, Mass.

Wanted—A No. 1 good watchmaker's lathe with chucks, etc. Prefer a W. W. or a Mosley. What do you want? J. H. Callaham, Box 216, Broken Bow, Okla.

100 different stamps for each arrowhead, large U. S. cent or ½ cent piece. G. Simmons, Box 454, Clementon, N. J.

Have ACE-HIGH and other magazines, set of Poe's works, fiction and education books, for Graflex or Eastman camera or guns. A. Derda, 1836 Cortland St., Chicago, Ill.

Will trade small electric generator for good .22 caliber rifle or what? Best offer gets it. Bennie Snyder, Dahmer, W. Va.

Have Columbia heavy frame bicycle, fine new tires. Want canoe, light boat, or? M. R. Wylie, 413 Cavour Ave., W., Fergus Falls, Minn.

Have toy mould, .22 single shot rifle. Want moving picture machine and film, or radio. Leland Buck, 509 North Mason St., Appleton, Wis.

Send your list for mine. Interested in telescopes and binoculars. B. W. Rautenkrent, 107 N. Elm St., Fairmont, Minn.

Have fine ukelin, has 32 strings, and is guitar and violin combined, also sheet music. Want repeater, shotgun, or .22. Send list. Jos. Sauer, 1321 Portland, Chicago Heights, Ill.

Trade high grade indestructible pearl necklaces for anything I can use. Leon Achuff, 257 Water St., Paterson, N. J.

Have phonograph, records, radio, wrist watch, headphones, 8x field glasses, for good outboard motor. Howard Grove, Box 282, Hillsboro, Ohio.

Have painless method for removing tattoo marks, gem stones, rough and polished. Want arrowheads, curios, etc. Earl Wilke, 993—16th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Want bookkeeping books, equipment and honey. Have big list, radio parts, hektograph, etc. Send your list. Harwell, Box 934, Charlotte, N. C.

Have books, typewriter, brass stencils, sign outfit, guns and small printing press size 3½ x 4. Would consider printer's type, or what have you? Calvin Cates, Redmond, Oregon.

Have new radio parts, eliminators, speakers, Stanley plane, violin, etc. Want wood tools, saws, electric tools, motors, etc. Jack Kelly, 5111 Barkwill Ave., Cleveland, Ohio.

Have a Harley-Davidson motorcycle to trade for anything of value. Machine fully equipped and in excellent condition. Exchange list. Hugo Michael, Arcadia, Iowa.

Have 8-power field glass, rods, reels, air rifles, mandolin, 15 Popular Mechanics, tools, camera, etc. Want 250-power microscope, or? John J. Cawein, 448 E. 87th St., New York, N. Y.

Trade bronze moulds of Statue of Liberty, for bicycle, portable typewriter of equal value. J. Nushart, 1453 Booth St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Have double barrel hammerless shotgun and vest. Will trade for best offer in old U. S. stamps. Ed M. Lundskow, 5802—20th Ave., Kenosha, Wis.

Have cowboy boots size 7, cowboy hat size 7, spurs and fancy straps and mounted cuffs. Want radio parts or sets. Kenneth T. Adamson, 234 E. Fifth St., Plainfield, N. J.

Have piano accordion. Want printing press, or what have you? Send list. George Indecki, 3215 Hammond St., Detroit, Mich.

Want radiola portable, short-wave concerter, push-pull radio transformer, have electric pick-up, also all kinds for radio parts. Lloyd Mitchell, Box 13, Eldora, Iowa.

Send me old Beadle dime and half-dime novels, old maps, old books on Indians and pioneer days, also old hunting knives. Anything in exchange. A. G. Heath, 444 E. 42nd St., Chicago, Ill.

Have 1887 model 11 mm. German army rifle, like new. Want smaller cal. repeater. Adolph Schuster, R. 3, Chehalis, Wash.

Trade 3-tube radiola, 60 magazines, 3 books, 1 Chevrolet generator, .32 rifle, hockey skates size 6½, to swap for motorcycle. Please write. D. Chambers, Armada, Alberta, Canada.

Boy scout uniform, camera, books, magazines, radio, earphones. Want portable typewriter, jazz orchestrations. Morey Hechler, 116 Thornton St., Revere, Mass.

Want art photos, Indian head coins, antlers' heads, model ships. Have rifles, radio set and parts, etc. What do you want? Mort Ward, 1922 Crotona Parkway, Bronx, N. Y.

48 Lone Scout Magazines, for stamps, or what? Want to trade stamps with foreign readers. Carlton Burnett, Corpus Christi, Texas.

For every 100 stamps sent, or two coins, I will send one good fiction magazine. J. Moriang, 364 E. Fourth St., New York City.

Want swords, daggers, old guns, Indian relics, old coins, gem stones. Have big swap list. Will swap Florida property. Goulding, Box 543, Eustis, Fla.

Have two vacant lots in Kansas City, Kansas. Will trade for truck address. T. E. Driggs, 1224 Mo. Ave., Joplin, Mo.

Want short-wave radio, battery. What do you want? J. A. Hale, 2140 H St., N. W., Washington, D. C.

I want the words of the song "Christina." What do you want? H. F. Fansler, Box 113, Farmville, Va.

Want electric pick-up, classic records, send lists for mine. Have big trade list. Winger, Box 905, Boise, Idaho.

100 all different stamps for each arrowhead, large U. S. cent or ½ cent piece. G. Simmons, Box 454, Clemenston, N. J.

For every 25 United cigar certificates I will send a card trick. Also want a good motorcycle, or? J. G. Weil, 4513 N. La Porte Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Have 20 books by Zane Gray and others. No trash. Want .45-70 rifle, .30-30 carbine, .8 or .10 ga. Joe Brewer, Pikeville, Ky.

Want swords, Atlas course, pennants, air rifle, horns, blank gun. Have most everything. All letters answered. W. Grund, 1160 Park Ave., N. Y. City.

Want old coins and old violins. Jno. Strauss, 1301 Madison Ave., Madison, Ill.

Will give 25 stamps or 5 United and Mutual coupons for every old U. S. coin sent me. Harry L. Farber, 1318 Brook Ave., New York City.

Want old coins, have sewing machine motor, starter for Ford, bound books. H. Bryden, 14 Village St., Reading, Mass.

Cavies, with names of institutions that use them. Want chickens. W. O'Neill, P. O. Box 134, Engelwood, Colo.

Anyone having old glassware, buffalo, log cabin and deer, Indian on lid, to exchange, please write. Atsie Lawrence, Box 165, Galveston, Ind.

Want portable typewriter in good condition. Have No. 3 folding Brownie camera, old, but takes clear pictures, also New University's dictionary and old books. G. U. Oller, Box 146, Hornbrook, Calif.

Have DeForest boxing course, heavy bag gloves, magazines, fiction, bird cages, ice skates, radio parts, tubes, etc. Want printing press, or? R. Ercolino, 25 Bay 26th St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Have "Fame and Fortune," "Pluck and Luck," and other novels, magazines, books. What's offered? Everett Smith, Star Route, Newport, Vt.

Have rare daguerreotypes, powder and shothorns, arrowheads to swap. Ben. F. Press, 3432 No. Bodine St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Have banjo uke with resonator, .22 repeater. Want police dog, muscle builders, or anything. G. B. Goodson, Box 100, Calhoun, Ga.

I will send 5 different match box tops, for five postcards or 5 Octagon coupons. Mrs. M. Spalding, Box 43, Glens Falls, N. Y.

Want short-wave parts for receiver or transmitter, or 15-25 ft. sailboat. Can get anything you want. All letters answered. C. Bolohan, 4521—6th St., Ecorse, Mich.

Movie stars autographed photos in oil colors. Want early or first day covers, stamps, Indian heads, or what? R. W. Dunn, 5351 South Arlington, Los Angeles, Calif.

Have pedigreed chinchilla rabbits to trade for old walnut beds, antiques, or? Mrs. Mary Salts, 601 Kings Highway, Rolla, Mo.

Will give 5 precancels or 10 foreign stamps for newspapers or 3 postcards. Will trade postcards with anybody. All letters answered. T. M. Kerfoot, 929 Caroline Ave., Nashville, Tenn.

Will exchange cards or letters with anyone in foreign countries. Joe A. Rieger, 933 Monroe St., Quincy, Ill.

Have Tarzan books, horns, mounted deer-head, small wild animals, magazines. Want pup, muscle courses, anything. G. L. Herburger, Box 63, John Day, Ore.

Have 75 magazines, aviation course, headphones, airplane parts, 1-2 h. p. D. C. motor. Want correspondence course, or what's offered? Write. John Mednansky, Box 126, Kodaka, So. Dak.

Have Geographic Magazines and cloth covered books, also courses, etc. Want field glasses, binoculars, etc. Al. Paskow, 6013—20th Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

I have several attractive folders of the great Cherokee National Forest. Will exchange for anything valuable. Chas. Higdon, Reliance, Tenn.

Have cut-down Springfield, cal. .30, with ammunition and spare parts. Other high-class guns. Want outboard motor, boat, or? R. Orlick, 276 Ave. A, New York, N. Y.

Want to swap airmail cachet covers with anyone, anywhere. All letters answered. Write. Jerry Chuman, Jr., 5005 S. Washtenaw Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Have Splitdorf radio, Magnavox speaker, Westinghouse chargers, parts, max-min. B eliminator. Want 3-tube short-wave receivers, typewriters, or what have you? J. K. Colson, 615 Broad St., Newcastle, Ind.

Send clean cigarette pictures or airmail stamps for stamps, coins, small antiques. Alexander L. Gooding, 354 Norwich Rd., Ipswich, England.

Have printing and radios. Want typewriter, printing supplies, wet B batteries, physical culture course, or? Bradley Whitfield, R. 1, Franklin, Tenn.

Incubator, brass enamel bird cages, magazines. Make offers. F. Trauger, 2658 Coral, Philadelphia, Pa.

Have knitter, Victrola, both A-1 shape. Trade either for high-power repeating rifle. J. Clark, Vesper, Wis.

Have clothbound books, formulas, flashlights, etc. Want stamp collections or stamps. F. Buston, Tilbury, Ont., Canada.

Have 4 cyl. magneto Buick generator and starter. Want repeating .22 rifle or what have you? W. Garey, Forest Lawn Ave., Stamford, Conn.

Want Indian peace metals, pipes, tomahawks, etc. Have ACE-HIGH, Collier magazines and other things. G. A. Flaskerd, 3809—44th Ave., So., Minneapolis, Minn.

Want incubators and brooders, any kind. Send full description and state your wants. All letters answered. Austin Windsor, 8 N. 26th St., Corgallis, Ore.

Have battery charger, radio, electric drill, typewriter, adding machine, trade for eliminators, dynamic speaker, or? Jay Steel, Cleves, Ohio.

Want typewriter in good condition. Have stamps, coins, air mail covers, sporting goods, or what's wanted? Jerry Chuman, Jr., 5005 S. Washtenaw Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Have U. S. commemoratives of Edison, Charleston, S. C., Massachusetts Bay, Washington, Franklin and Harding. Want foreign stamps. James O'Donald Mays, Masonic, Millen, Va.

Have .22 Stevens rifle, gasoline blow torch, magazines, cap and ball rifle. Want field glasses, folding kodak, or? B. N. Crawford, R. R. 3, Winchester, Ky.

41 acres on Nigei Island, B. C., commercial fishing, hunting, trapping. Wonderful climate. What have you? O. L. Elliott, 460 College, Portland, Ore.

Have 3-tube radio, musical bells, tripod, gas saver. Trade for electric radio, U. S. coins, or diamond. R. Waldron, 201 E. 9th St., Caruthersville, Mo.

Have radio sets, tubes, meters, parts. Want typewriter, camera, chemical apparatus, rifle, or what? J. Weiss, Box 18, Stapleton, N. Y.

Will exchange stamps, precancels and air covers. Also want collections of same. Junior Niehouse, 1208 Hodiamont Ave., St. Louis, Mo.

Have Clark and Snider shotgun in fine condition. Want 8-tube battery radio in good shape. J. T. Mills, Vernon Hill, Va.

Want 5-string banjo, will trade oil and gas lease. C. C. Newton, Martell, Calif.

Ford Tudor 25, violin, guitar, 10 lessons, 12-ga. single, camp stove, for Harley, Indian Twin, or single. E. F. Delano, 2247 Lincoln Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Want motorcycle. Have or can get what you want. J. H. Luttrell, 715 W. Main St., Greenville, Tenn.

Have motor boat, searchlight, fine air pistol, relics, etc. Want large spark coil, 3-inch or more. F. Copeman, 15 W. 37th St., New York City.

Have LaSalle Salesmanship, drum course, I. C. S. poultry course, magazines, books, leggings, other things. Send list and state what's wanted. A. Quenzer, 315 Barbey St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Will trade contract airmails, No. 9, for other routes. Also want old U. S. stamps. C. J. Peirce, 329—12th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Have Civil War sword, electric trains, drafting tools, books, stamps, No. 8 erector set. Want coins of all kinds. Send list. E. McCarr, 32 Wistar Place, Atlantic City, N. J.

Want all kinds of parts for a Johnson motor wheel. Also all kinds of catalogs or motor wheels. All letters answered. C. Birkmire, 4519 Ritchie St., Manayunk, Phila., Pa.

Have stamps, cigarette lighter, magazines, safety razors. Want guns, books, 1922-23 ACE-HIGHS and other magazines. Glen F. Colter, Baleo, Mo.

Want stories and poems. Have same, also magazines. Send list. A. L. Lavinsky, 101 Endicott St., Worcester, Mass.

Boxing gloves, musical instruments, books, magazines, etc., to swap for anything. Emanuel Stein, R. 1, Box 163, Egg Harbor, N. J.

Want mounted birds, etc., clothbound books, or? Have magazines, books, gummed labels, etc. Letters answered. Jim O'Brien, 112-09—167th St., Jamaica, L. I., N. Y.

Kodaks, electric motors, welding torch and many other offers, for 5 x 8 printing press or offers. What is wanted? W. S. Flint, Salyersville, Ky.

Have 1894 dime, uke, new volley ball, 20 magazines, ACE-HIGH and others. Want guns, good condition only. All letters answered. Albin Betker, 1848 W. 18th St., Chicago, Ill.

Want radio parts. Have 20 Popular and Modern Mechanics magazines, books of mechanics, shop notes. W. H. Smith, Star Route, Newport, Vt.

Send 10 recent U. S. commemoratives and receive application to Concordia International Stamp Exchange Club. Members everywhere. Michek, Box 153, So. Norwalk, Conn.

25 precancelled stamps for perfect arrowhead, 50 precancelled stamps for perfect spearhead, 100 foreign stamps for stone drill or punch. J. J. Cleland, 0426 Norfolk Ave., Norfolk, Neb.

I will trade a book match cover from a hotel in my city for one from anywhere. Bob Potts, 215 Lyon St., Albany, Ore.

100 foreign or U. S. stamps for each good arrowhead. 100 foreign stamps for U. S. precancels. Exchange with foreign collectors. H. Potter, 504 N. Russell St., Champaign, Ill.

Have plate camera, takes a picture size four by five. Perfect condition. Want magazines. Mrs. A. B. Walker, Box 141, Harrisville, N. Y.

What do you want for your old aquariums? Have most anything. A. Dreisbach, 614 N. 8th St., Allentown, Pa.

Want army regimental enameled insignia. Have many different insignia and old coins to trade. Wm. Connelly, 227 Union St., Schenectady, N. Y.

Have 3-tube radio (needs adjustment) speaker, storage battery, for what? Ben F. Press, 3432 No. Bodine St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Will exchange crocheted doilies for cactus plants. Write to F. C. Reed, 610 N. 43rd St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Have 200 postcards, 1905-1917 mixed cancellations, stamps, and old U. S. stamps. Want U. S. commemoratives and cachet air mail covers. H. P. Osterhout, Glen Ridge, N. J.

Have prism binoculars, field glasses, telescopes, want garden tractor, guns, or what? Dr. Paul J. Myers, Crawfordsville, Ind.

Have books, magazines, many articles. Want Indian head cents or other old U. S. coins in good condition. Ruth Horne, Sparkman, Ark.

Will trade Ludwig professional banjo-uke, Victor and Brunswick new phonograph records, Earle Liederman course, for golf clubs, or? Dwight Moore, 413 Bestor St., Peoria, Ill.

Want fiction magazines, books, all kinds, also "Film Fun." Have magazines, books, auto parts, etc. Carl Swanson, Washburn, No. Dak.

Have a good violin. Want a good orchestra banjo or sax. Earl Wanless, Viroqua, Wis.

Fox .20-ga. hammerless, automatic ejectors, new, perfect. Want Browning sixteen automatic. J. A. Peterson, 413 W. 23rd St., Cheyenne, Wyo.

Have 4-tube radio, complete, shotgun, motor, mantel clock, etc. Will give all for A. C. pilot super. Abram Lang, 1200 Agent St., Calumet, Mich.

Have postcard collection, mostly North Carolina mountain scenery. Will swap for what have you? Lawrence Lively, 404 Rutherford St., Greeville, S. C.

Violin, cuckoo clock, binoculars, A and B eliminator, radio parts, speakers, chargers, etc. Need electric portable drill, spray gun, or? Jack Kelly, 5111 Barkwill Ave., Cleveland, O.

Have stamp album that's well started with fine stamps, many U. S. Write for information. Want spears and arrowheads or old guns. Martin Hetzel, 4145 W. 21st Pl., Chicago, Ill.

Will swap for Lincoln medals. Have few Socony N. E. road maps. Mrs. May Nimeskern, 23 Willard St., West Quincy, East Milton P. O., Mass.

Live birds and animals wanted. Have high-power rifle, water power clothes washer, gasoline engine, printing press, relics, etc. George Wildrick, L. B. 314, Addison, N. Y.

Savage .22 high power, like new, Harley Davison parts, Ford parts, new radiator, starter generator. Want binoculars, good typewriter. Herbert A. Voecks, Pierce, Nebr.

Have Freshman trickle charger for radio A battery. Want any kind of old weapons. J. M. Clark, 1900 Elmore St., Cincinnati, O.

Have .22 repeater in very good condition. Want A and B battery eliminator. No junk. Sheldon D. Smith, P. O. Box 742, Dunsmuir, Calif.

Want coins and stamps. Have magazines, medals, National Geographic magazines, stamps. Trade stamps on Scott's basis. E. Valentini, 105-25-62 Dr., Forest Hills, New York.

A 4-room house and lot in Dallas, So. Dak., to trade for a house and lot in some good Kansas town. Ed. J. Cordon, Dallas, So. Dak.

Have Indian relics to exchange. Write for my list and let's trade some. A. E. Noel, Blackwater, Va.

1 postcard or 10 stamps for every coin sent me. Send at least five at a time. Harry Beaman, Jr., 2131 N. 15th Ave., Birmingham, Ala.

Have 81 white pennies, 1859-1865 to exchange for old U. S. stamps, general collection or coins. Alex W. Jozik, 5051 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Have cedar and spruce seedlings, mountain ferns and pin cushion cactus, mineral specimens, etc. What have you? Albert Stevens, c/o A. H. Stevens, Loveland, Colo.

Fortune telling chart for any stamp on envelope before 1870. W. Moore, 44 River, Salamanca, N. Y.

Have all kinds of old coins, will trade for anything and everything. Will give pound stamps for four airport covers. A. F. Hill, Box 1580, Vernon, Texas.

Will give 50 different U. S. stamps for each two dollar U. S. stamp. 100 different foreign stamps for each one dollar stamp. J. J. Cleland, 0426 Norfolk Ave., Norfolk, Neb.

Have cut and polished gem stones. Want rough gemstones and old guns. Send for list. Earl Wilke, 993—16th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Have coins, coupons, stamps, magazines. Want binoculars. K. Kronish, 770 St. Marks Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Lot fine stamps, books, relics, coins to trade for .32-volt generator, old coins, guns, swords, or most anything. Dr. J. C. Edmundoz, Box 126, Zolfo Springs, Fla.

Will send new watch for each 1894 dime, 1913 Liberty nickel, or 20 U. S. old coins. Heinrich, 1344 N. Washington Ave., Scranton, Pa.

Want Coleman gasoline lantern, good condition. Have fishing tackle, late magazines, other things, no junk. Arthur Poe, 2528 W. Dodier St., St. Louis, Mo.

Book formulas, 35 cal. cartridges, .38-40 Winchester, pedigreed fox terrier puppies, English leghorn cockerels, Cushman engine. Want guns. W. Taylor, Marionville, Mo.

Have lot. Want land. Virgil McWhorten, R. F. D. 9, Nashville, Tenn.

Will trade five postcards of my city for five of yours, or 100 stamps for every six cards sent me. Jack Schwarts, 2509½ E. 4th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

D. C. generator, General Electric, can be used for battery charging or for farm lighting plant, clay pigeon trap. Want guns. Ernest Mosier, Batavia, O.

Hounds, hunting all kinds coon, fox, etc., A-1. Stewart clipping machine, large generator, want poultry, wrist watch. Dawson, W. Main St., Tuckerton, N. J.

Have .22 Stevens favorite, .38 and .55 single shot Marlin, cigar lighter, books, magazines, stamps, telescope. Want boxing gloves, or? Letters answered. W. Anderson, R. 1, Box 116, Balsam Lake, Wis.

I will trade stamps with all. Want stamps on letters from other countries and U. S., if old. Herman Mettle, 567 E. 22nd St., Paterson, N. J.

Have old books, sewing machine, other things. Send for list. H. Lee Moore, R. 1, Box 58, Bridgeton, Me.

Will cut and polish your rough gem stones for you and take other rough stone in trade. Earl Wilke, 993 16th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Have 30 Western story magazines and 150 others. Want Western or airplane stories. Raymond Bornhoft, Box 40, R. R. 2, Wheaton, Minn.

81 Indian head copper nickel pennies to exchange for old U. S. stamps on or off envelopes, good general collection. Alex W. Jozik, 5051 Van Dyke Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Have 50 magazines, heavy leather basket-ball cover and cigar lighter. Want Liederman course, or what have you? J. Miller, West Harrison St., Pawnee, Okla.

Wish to trade U. S. and foreign stamps at catalogue value singly and in sets. Try me. Paul Beckemeyer, Beckemeyer, Ill.

Have Henderson motorcycle, hydraulic juice press, 3,200 gallon capacity, light six Studebaker, sword. Any swap considered. Walter Meyer, Vera Cruz, Ind.

Have old stamp collection in album, also Confederate state stamps and Graf Zeppelin, coins, books. Want good rowboat or canoe. Helen Martin, 3544—167th St., N. Y.

Want .410 repeater, also binoculars. Have high grade compass suitable for surveying. Some new auto accessories. L. L. Stone, Bayshore, Fla.

Indian stones exchanged. Want "Ware's History of West," writings on old Julesburg and old California trails, fine Kentucky rifle. L. M. Lytle, Julesburg, Sedgwick Co., Colo.

50 stamps for every 10 postcards (views) sent me. Send any amount up through fifty. Harry Beaman, Jr., 2131 North 16th Ave., Birmingham, Ala.

Have radio parts, tubes. Want parts, tubes, meters, dynamic speaker, eliminator parts, guns, or? J. W. Landon, 202 Anderson St., N. S. Pittsburgh, Pa.

One ACE-HIGH or other magazine for each U. S. coin dated before 1875, except Indian cents, sent to M. A. Pruitt, 130 K St., Anderson, S. C.

Banjo, baseball outfit, dolls, books, wool lumberjacket. Want typewriter, medals, gold coins, bicycle. James Wilson, 937 Jefferson Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Want old Beadle dime and half dime novels, old books about Indians and pioneer days, Indian curios, old maps, weapons, antiques, all kinds. Anything in exchange. A. G. Heath, 444 E. 42nd St., Chicago, Ill.

Bubble boat and games to swap for printing, or what have you? J. Bessler, 59-16 Mt. Olivet Ave., Maspeth, L. I., N. Y.

Want back issues of National Geographic Magazine for years before 1914. What do you want in exchange for them? Chas. J. Rike, Farmersville, Texas.

Have wrist watch to trade. Want stamps. P. S. Demers, 75 Main St., Springvale, Me.

Trade suits, overcoats, dresses slightly used but cleaned and pressed, for anything useful. Citizens' Dry Cleaners, Box 22, War, W. Va.

Have old coins, postcards, books, magazines, fountain pen. Want profit-sharing coupons. Randle Fulk, Mt. Airy, N. C.

Magic of all kinds, old relics, World War relics, for tattooing outfit or offers. Harry E. Poe, R. R. 4, Shelbyville, Ind.

Have new tent, .20-ga. single, .22 A-1 complete drum outfit. Want good motorcycle. No junk. Robert Colburn, 486 Oak St., Danville, Ill.

State your wants or ask for my list if you have late encyclopedia, binoculars, kodak, violin, mimeograph, office equipment. Adam Quenzer, 315 Barbey St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Have electric tools, air compressor, welding outfit, typewriter. Want outboard motor, movie camera, projector, or? Kenneth Chaffin, 500 Chicago Ave., Ft. Worth, Texas.

Want pennants, swords, ship models, B. B. air rifle, and comic signs. All letters answered. W. Grund, 1160 Park Ave., N. Y. City.

Have fine precanceled stamps (basis Hover Bros.), to trade for foreign (basis Scott). Send selection or write. E. A. Sponholz, 930 Woodlawn Ave., West Allis, Wis.

Want game getter, .45 single action Colt, antique guns, or? Have guns, mandolin, harp, field glasses, loud speaker, etc. H. Kraft, Ludington, Mich.

Want old guns of any description, also flasks and bullet moulds. What do you want? Letters answered. H. Stivers, 1513½ E. Ocean Blvd., Long Beach, Calif.

Send me five postcard views of your state and I will send same from Oregon. Bob Potts, 215 Lyon St., Albany, Ore.

Will trade set of "Self Mastery" books for? E. F. Remington, Hugo, Colo.

Have many pictures and souvenirs of Hawaii to trade for what have you? Fred Slingerland, Headquarters Battery, 55th C. A., Fort Ruger, Honolulu.

For every 10 recent U. S. commemoratives I will give the address of honest stamp collector. Foreign, 15 stamps. Michek, Box 153, S. Norwalk, Conn.

Have 20 lessons on hypnotism, magazines, books, trade for books, or most anything. R. L. Maliba, R. 4, Lincolnton, N. C.

Want cowboy riding boots, saddle, spurs, chaps, bridle. Exchange Ford 1925 motor. Have Ford racing body. Will swap for good saddle horse. L. De Marco, Jr., 195 Pine St., Fair Haven, Conn.

Want incubator. State capacity and make good condition. State what's wanted in first letter. C. L. Couture, 8—1st St., Adams, Mass.

Have O'Henry and Maupassant, each complete in one volume, also works of Shaftesbury and Liederman course. Want magazines, books, or what have you? G. Jarvis, Flag Pond, Tenn.

What is offered for Bavarian stamp of 1849? Have more good stamps on hand. Jack Goodstein, 562 Quincy St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Would like to swap with readers in foreign countries. Will send what you need for stamps of your country. W. K. Jones, 644 Straus Bldg., Chicago, Ill.

Want drawings of house boats and summer cottages, piano rolls, typewriter. Write and tell me what you have and what's wanted. C. L. Couture, 8—1st St., Adams, Mass.

Have articles of value and stamps to exchange for printing. E Queeney, 90 Fremont St., Gloversville, N. Y.

Want anything pertaining to cartooning, for? Urbano A. Sigl, 201 N. Central Ave., Marshfield, Wis.

Have tenor banjo with 43 lessons, U. S. and foreign coins, daggers. Want U. S. coins, curios, Indian relics, or what? G. Novak, 4424 W. Fulton St., Chicago, Ill.

Have 17-j. lady's wrist watch, like new. What have you? Also 1851 penny. No junk. Oakley Everetts, Delmar, Iowa.

Want Corona typewriter and Zeiss 6 or 8-power field glasses. What do you want? W. H. Mayer, 343 S. San Pedro St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Will trade new mail order plan for red stamp. W. Defrees, 1036 W. 90th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

100 all different stamps for each arrowhead, large U. S. cent or ½ cent piece. G. Simmons, Box 454, Clementon, N. J.

For every good old U. S. I will give 10 foreign stamps. R. Enders, Room 716, 66 Beaver St., N. Y.

I have black and red rubies, mineral specimens, petrified wood, and moonstone to swap for arrowheads and Indian relics. J. E., 132 W. 4th St., Salida, Colo.

Have two standard size motion picture cameras with tripod, also 5-reel airplane photoplay. Want Graflex, view camera, typewriter, or? R. Inman, 202 Spruce St., Coffeyville, Kans.

Will trade .22 repeater, wrist watch (Swiss), and radio cabinet for short-wave low-powered transmitter. Bill Cowan, Kiefer, Okla.

Have Strongfort course, camera, old coins, flashlight, auto tools, handcuffs, more. Want typewriter, old coins, or? W. Heinrich, 1344 N. Washington Ave., Scranton, Pa.

Have .30-40 Springfield sporter to trade for Marble gamegetter. I. W. Randall, 155 W. Main St., Rochester, N. Y.

Send me a self-addressed stamped envelope and two used airmail stamps and receive application blank for membership to a club for the exchange of stamps and postcards. E. Sierra, Box 1514, Richmond, Va.

Send 100 foreign stamps and receive one little Blue Book. Harry Seligman, 371 Elwood Ave., Oakland, Calif.

Want silver, nickel, gold coins from South and Central American countries, also Portugal and Roumania. What do you want? E. H. Lawson, 653 N. 29th St., Louisville, Ky.

Have fine .22 Remington model 6, books, and World War gas mask. Want motorcycle or outboard motors or shotgun. No junk. Write. C. Cutright, 1222 McKinley Ave., Akron, O.

Trade 40-acre Ozark farm for printing plant anywhere in Missouri. Give full description in first letter. Nolan Peyton, Elmer, Mo.

Want old violin and violin teachers' names and addresses. Have violins, guns, etc. E. E. Fuller, 223 E. Wayne St., Ft. Wayne, Ind.

Want E-flat bass, also other band instruments. Have radios, hundreds of radio parts, books and magical apparatus. Rud Dubala, Ganado, Texas.

For every 35 stamps sent me I will send a list of leading Canadian Aces (aviators) who fought in the Great War. G. G. Holden, Campbell St., Melita, Man., Canada

Want glass paper weights, old guns, books, coins, paper money, old war envelopes. Have thousand articles. J. Dalton, Wellsville, O.

Want old violins in any condition. What do you want? J. J. Irvins, 4518 S. Talman Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Height increasing course, I. C. S. poultry course, Dodge Drum School course, flashlight, leggings, National Geographics, many other things, for? Adam Quenzer, 315 Barbey St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Will trade books by Grey, Brand, Curwood, Seltzer, etc., for other books. Also have .12-ga. and .16-ga. shells. No junk. S. Taylor, 210 W. Alfred Ave., Tampa, Fla.

Have 2,000 high grade stamps in Scott catalogue, many fiction books, 1 pair clamp ice skates, 1 football leather cover. Want good typewriter, .32 repeater. M. Goldstein, 405 State St., Perth Amboy, N. J.

Have World Wide set of encyclopedias. Will exchange for typewriter, or what have you? Oliver Yuori, Grayland, Wash.

Have mandolin, saxophone, Edison Amberola and records. Want outboard motor, shotgun, or? George Kiefer, Jr., 430 West High, Piqua, O.

Have Indian relics, camera, uke, stamps, big list. Want U. S. and foreign coins, or? Ted. Pickens, Box 172, Downing, Mo.

Have set six vols. automobile engineering, leather bound. Want old coins. Art Soop, Webster City, Iowa.

Magazines, comic sections, books, old papers, swap for stamps, coins, arrows, etc. F. Trauger, 2658 Coral St., Philadelphia, Pa.

Will exchange the blindfold street drive secret, for tattoo designs and stencils, or? B. C. Smith, R. 5, Quitman, Ga.

Oliver typewriter, .22 repeater, cigarette case, harmonicas, camera, knife, razor for binoculars, kodak, guns, musical instruments, Dr. Elliott's shelf books. Jim Flynn, 511 S. Pearl St., Thornton, Ind.

I have a collection of old U. S. A. coins, all in good condition. Valuable to someone. What am I offered? P. P. Cousins, 66 Goodyear St., New Haven, Conn.

Want street car tokens. Will give 50 stamps for each different token sent. R. W. Dunn, 5331 South Arlington, Los Angeles, Calif.

Want to exchange horse race playing system. Send one or ask me to send one first. Rex Mason, Gen. Delivery, San Diego, Calif.

I have safety razors to trade for unused air post stamps of any country. H. F. Fansler, Box 113, Farmville, Va.

Will exchange fine foreign coins and stamps for U. S. large cents. G. H. Dalton, 1223 N. Clark St., Chicago, Ill.

Have 30 sheets of drafting paper, one portfolio, boxing gloves, one rare coin, encyclopedia, and many things. Joe Gilzine, 18 W. 116th St., Chicago, Ill.

Have lot movie films, Westerns, comedies, everything. What have you to offer me in films? R. Schmitt, Livingston St., Celina, O.

Airplane and real estate in busy steel mill city for a farm or what? J. Keefe, Box 1031, Hammond, Ind.

Have check protector, electric fan, 3-tube radio, radio parts, camera, books, bicycle parts. Want good banjo, no junk. Al Corbett, 120 No. Utah St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Pet coyote, boots and spurs, uke, guns, relics, coins, no junk. What's offered. D. E. Ellis, Small, Idaho.

Have uncut agates, magazines, to trade for disc records in good condition. Ray Bateman, Libby, Mont.

Console cabinet electric radio, battery radio set, lady's and gent's diamond ring, wrist watch. Exchange for what have you? Write. Garnet Simms, Lake, New York.

Will give 500 stamps for 3-cent piece, 350 for ½ cent, 250 for large cents before 1847. H. Offerle, 6145 Stahelin Ave., Detroit, Mich.

Have two new radios and a large quantity of new tubes. Want printing press and saxophone, or? J. Eby, 2805 Far Hills Ave., Dayton, O.

Send five postcards of your city, will send five of mine by return mail. Jack Talerico, 2316 9th Ave., Beaver Falls, Pa.

Want to exchange stamps, Scott's basis, with advanced collectors. Prompt replies. W. Mehmel, 552 Mountain Ave., Winnipeg, Man., Canada.

Have old German prayer book, 101 years old, written by hand. Want movie or printing equipment. Emil Arp, 1933 West Fourth St., Davenport, Iowa.

25 stamps, 10 postmarks, or 5 view cards for every foreign or old U. S. coin sent. J. A. Rieger, 933 Monroe St., Quincy, Ill.

U. S. commemoratives, first day covers, exchanged for Hawaii, Guam, Danish West Indies stamps. F. Crouch, 802 Madison, St. Joseph, Mo.

Graf Zeppelin stamp for clothbound Lindbergh book. 50 unused Edison, for 1,000 British Colonies. Oscar Bishop, 508 W. Hempstead, Nashville, Ark.

Tennis racquet, 8-point deerhead, 3 cigar lighters, 4 new golf balls, 25 National Geographics. For? Frank Clowes, 109 W. 21st St., Tulsa, Okla.

Want old violins, maplewood. Have violins, etc. E. E. Fuller, 223 E. Wayne St., Ft. Wayne, Ind.

Want camera, erector set, binoculars, .22 rifle, telegraph set. Have crystal set, tubes. Let's swap lists. J. B. Kirby, 7137 Fluery Way, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Indian relics wanted. I have a big list to trade such as old coins, camera, minerals, etc. R. Wemerson, 28 So. Laurel St., Bridgeton, N. J.

Beautiful beaded garters, bags, Spanish silk shawls, silk coolie coats, etc. Best offer. W. F. Gebhardt, 3107 S. Clinton St., Ft. Wayne, Ind.

Have Federal drawing course, Jiu-Jitsu, stamps, formulas, herb doctor books, mail order books, camera. Want printing, multigraphing? W. H. Daley, 1466 E. Main St., Rochester, N. Y.

Want Remington automatic shotgun, have 2 Mausers and 5 vols. Auto Mechanics, same as new. H. M. Jones, Box 173, Arlington Heights, Ill.

Have Frost earphones, magazines, books, baseball uniform, gymnasium suit and shoes. List of others, trade for motorcycle in good condition. Write. H. D. Varlie, 657 Maxwelton St., Lexington, Ky.

Want tent, fishing tackle, guns, traps. Have radio, portable phonograph, sewing machine, old violin, mandolin, or? 487 E. 47th St., Los Angeles, Calif.

Want Crossman or Hoffman air pistol. Have radio parts. What have you? R. Glass, Box 367, Roseville, Mich.

Have Lionel electric train, station, bridge, transformer in good condition. Want .32 special carbine, or 25.20 repeater, or Eastman's kodak. E. Lomax, 807 Mass. Ave., N. E. Washington, D. C.

Want outboard motor. Have binoculars, .32 auto pistol, mandolin, radio parts. Write R. N. Nelson, Camp Grove, Ill.

Want to trade book match covers with everyone. Send some. Bob Potts, 215 Lyons St., Albany, Ore.

Your name, address and business printed on 500 gummed labels. For books, printing supplies, taxidermist's tools, etc. Make offers. O'Brien, 112-09 167th St., Jamaica, N. Y.

Want binoculars over 10x, microscope. Have electric blanket, violet ray, books on astrology, and many other things. What do you want? W. Ernest, 627 Peyton Bldg., Spokane, Wash.

Have L. L. Cooke electrical course. Have large list. Want Coleman gasoline lantern, automatic tackle box and golf set. Other offers considered. E. J. Liss, 4815 Homerlee Ave., East Chicago, Ind.

I want advertising space, also printing press. I have most anything except antiques or coins. Send offers. S. E. Harrington, Lyons, Wis.

Have ten brass Pyrene fire extinguishers, electric fan, 1c, 2c, and 3c stamps between 1870 and 1890, for what? A. W. Thompson, 14 Valley St., Portland, Maine.

I wish to trade newspapers. Send for my list. Edward Rutter, 2004 Bryn Mawr, Haddon Heights, N. J.

Will give 10 United coupons for one magazine. Will give football pump to anyone offering the most magazines. Donald Bimstein, 207-19 Jamaica Ave., Bellaire, L. I.

Want stamps, coins, collections, Scott catalog, arrowheads, relics, medals, etc. Have hundreds books, magazines, viewcards, presidential and baseball buttons, etc. V. J. McMurtry, 4133 Kenmore Ave., Chicago, Ill.

Short-wave and A. C. parts wanted. Have electrical and radio parts, ukelin, shotgun, radio courses, tools and coins. Send list. C. A. Emmerich, 228 Chestnut, Jeannette, Pa.

Mexican curios, Aztec pottery, small cactus plants, rattlesnake rattles. State wants and give offers. B. P. Willis, 138 Goliad St., San Antonio, Texas.

Have bicycle and used parts, two radios, hunting knife, watch, stamps. Want small printing press, punching bag. Ben D. Gross, Jr., 207 McKinley Ave., Eufaula, Okla.

WANTED—INFORMATION

Are you looking for anyone who has been missing for a long time? If so, write down, either typed or hand-printed, all particulars and we will publish your notice in ACE-HIGH. *Notices may be listed anonymously if you so desire. Before taking action concerning any answers received, be sure to lay the matter before us. We assume no responsibility for this department. Do not send any money to strangers. Notify us at once when you have found your man.*

CONNER, ALFRED L.—Left his four children 12 years ago. He is about 5 ft. 8 in. tall, dark complexioned, has brown eyes, very prominent teeth, two crooked fingers on each hand, and is a very strong Socialist. He gives speeches on corner streets and defies the police. Anyone knowing his whereabouts please notify Grace Sanches, Memorial Hospital, Worcester, Mass.

LANGFORD, BRYANT, or BRYANT, WM.—Last heard of he had a ranch somewhere near San Diego, Calif., about 15 years ago. Will anyone knowing his whereabouts kindly inform his brother, as he is very anxious to hear from him. T. J. Langford, c/o ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

DAVIDSON, CHARLES—Last heard of about August, 1905, when he was at 308 Main St., Los Angeles, Calif. Any information concerning him will be appreciated by his brother. N. R. Davidson, 411 So. Smyth St., Mart, Texas.

STEVENS, THADDEUS—Age 24, has blue eyes, blond hair, and of medium build, formerly of the U. S. S. Tampa. Last heard from in Indianapolis, Ind., his home town. Will appreciate hearing from his comrades of the U. S. S. Tampa, and otherwise, concerning his whereabouts. Has a government job.

Mother and brother also living. Miss Katherine Russo, 761 E. 226th St., New York City.

S. S. CARMANIA—If this meets the eye of any of the boys who immigrated out to Canada through the Salvation Army on the S. S. Carmania, which left Liverpool, England, on August 7th, 1924, will they please write to me, as I would like to hear from them again? Paul Deacon, c/o ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

LUTZYKOWSKI, WACLAW—About 1915 went to Grace Lake, Indiana, last seen in Texas. About 48 years old now. Have interesting news for him. Any information will be greatly appreciated. William, c/o ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE.

R. G. W. G. V.—Please come to Mary. She wants you so, and can't stand this. Will send money.

AROUND THE STOVE

WORD FROM ENGLAND

Dear Editor:

Your ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE *is just fine. Over on this side of the herring pond England needs something like this to get a thrill out of life. I would sooner miss my meal than miss a single issue of your magazine.*

Is it possible for you to publish this letter? I would like ever so much to have pen pals. One reads your Western stories and they seem to be just dreams. I think it would be rather wonderful if I could actually correspond with some real live Westerners.

Hoping you may be able to help, I am,

Yours truly,
(MISS) HILDA E. NORMAN.

c/o 2nd Fl., St. John St. Chambers,
2, St. John St., Deansgate,
Manchester, England.

LIKED HOFFMAN NOVEL

Dear Editor:

I am writing to tell you how much I enjoy reading ACE-HIGH. *I have just finished reading the First June Issue and liked the story, "The Man From Eagle Pass," first rate. To be frank I get a kick out of every story I read in* ACE-HIGH. *When I say a better magazine is not published, I am saying a lot, but it's true.*

Will somebody please write to me? I promise you that all letters will be answered. I am 21 years old, have blond curly hair, am 6 ft. 1 in. tall, weigh 165 pounds, and have hazel gray eyes.

Here's to ACE-HIGH, *may it continue to grow.*

Sincerely,
RAY WILLIAMS.

14 Lucas St., Walhalla, S. C.

FIFTEEN AND A BLONDE

Dear Editor:

I have started reading ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE *just recently and have found it to be the best magazine I have read for many years. Some of the stories like "Haunted Island," by Charles Oluf Olsen, and "Guns of Glory," by W. D. Hoffman, are extremely good.*

I am interested in your "Around the Stove" section and would like very much to join. I am fifteen years of age, a blonde, about five feet tall. I would like very much to have someone correspond with me, young or old, male or female.

Wishing the ACE-HIGH *the best of success, I am,*

Sincerely,
(MISS) BEULAH JONES.

120 No. Main St., Franklin, N. H.

FROM THE SEA COAST

Dear Editor:

Please make the grateful warmth of your stove reach me by publishing this letter, so that I can feel that I am one of the gang "Around the Stove."

I hope every reader of ACE-HIGH *will cast his or her eyes over my letter, so that everyone will note my plea. I would appreciate it greatly if everyone would correspond with me. I live on the sea coast, and would therefore furnish bits of information to those living in inland cities.*

I will answer all letters, regardless of age or sex.

I will appreciate it greatly if you will publish this letter.

Sincerely yours,
MOREY HECHLER.

116 Thornton St., Revere, Mass.

A NEW ZEALANDER

Dear Editor:

As a reader of ACE-HIGH *for some time I would like to tell you that it's the best Western magazine I have ever read. I liked "The Law of Lead" and "The Gold of Gunsight Gap" very much and would like to read more by the same authors.*

If you have room for me "Around the Stove," I'd like to ask some young cowpunchers to write to me. Would also like to hear from readers in Canada, China or Africa.

Again, Editor, thanks for your splendid mag.

Yours truly,
(MISS) GLADYS SMITH.

Quebec Rd., Milford, Auckland, N. Z.

TOO MUCH IS ENOUGH!

Dear Editor:

In your January number you were kind enough to print my letter from Australia asking for pen pals.

May I ask you now to print, as soon as you can, a note of appreciation to the 1,097 readers who wrote. The letters followed me to England in sheafs. Many were damaged by a fire on the M. S. Comerin, and they are still coming.

While it is a tribute to the pulling power of your mag. and to your readers' friendliness, it is a financial and physical impossibility to answer all. I gave up after the first 40.

I should like very much to have you print this to let the readers know that I was greatly appreciative to their response and to ask all to whom I am unable to reply to, to accept my thanks and apologies.

Cordially yours,
CLAUDE B. WEBER, Capt.

16, Huxley Sayze, Cambridge Rd.,
N. 18, London, England.

PRAISE FOR CRUMP

Dear Editor:

I started to read ACE-HIGH MAGAZINE *in 1926 and can honestly say that it is the best magazine I have ever read. I enjoy all the stories in the magazine, but "The Wolf of the Roan Hills," by J. Irving Crump, sure was a great thriller.*

I would like to correspond with other readers of this great magazine. My chief hobby is writing letters and I faithfully promise to answer every letter I receive. I have dark wavy hair, dark eyes, weigh 120 pounds, and I am 5 ft. 2 in. tall. Guess my age and receive my picture. I am between ten and twenty, so come on and start guessing.

Wishing you and the magazine every success, I am,

Yours respectfully,
(MISS) VALERIE BELIVEAU.

Box 561, Campbellton, N. B., Canada.

"A CORKER"

Dear Editor:

The serial, "Guns of Glory," certainly was a good story and I enjoyed every chapter of it. I wish you would run another serial by W. D. Hoffman soon. The serial now running, "Breed of Gun Smoke," is a corker too.

ACE-HIGH *is the best magazine in the world and I hope the stories continue to be as good in the future.*

Sincerely yours,
JNO. STRAUSS.

1301 Madison Ave., Madison, Ill.

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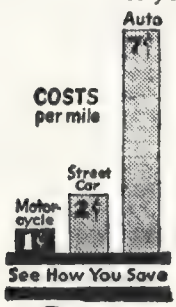

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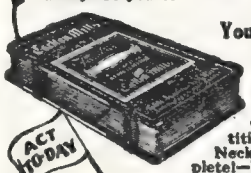

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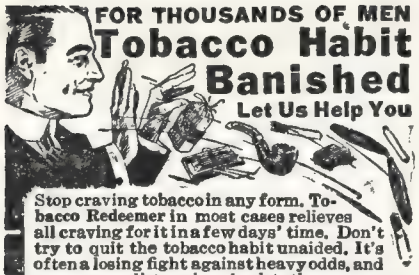

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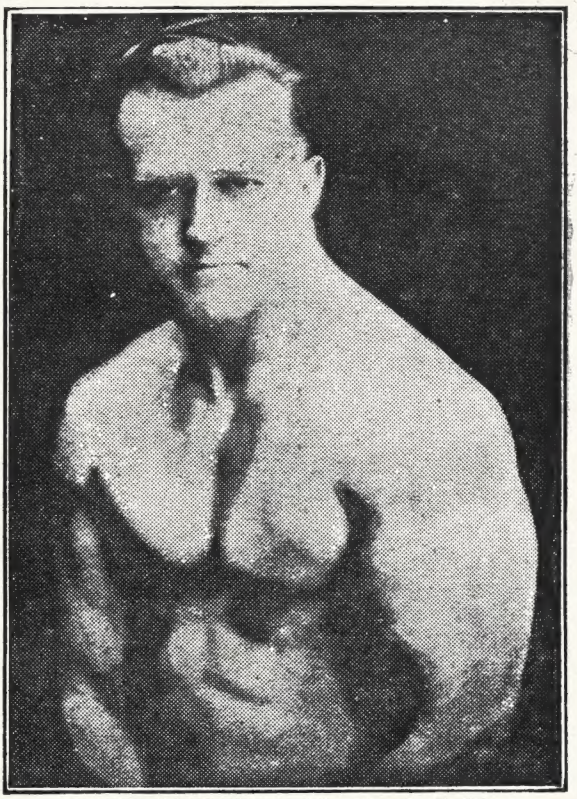

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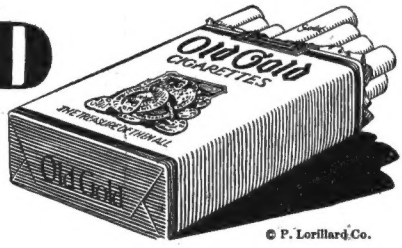

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